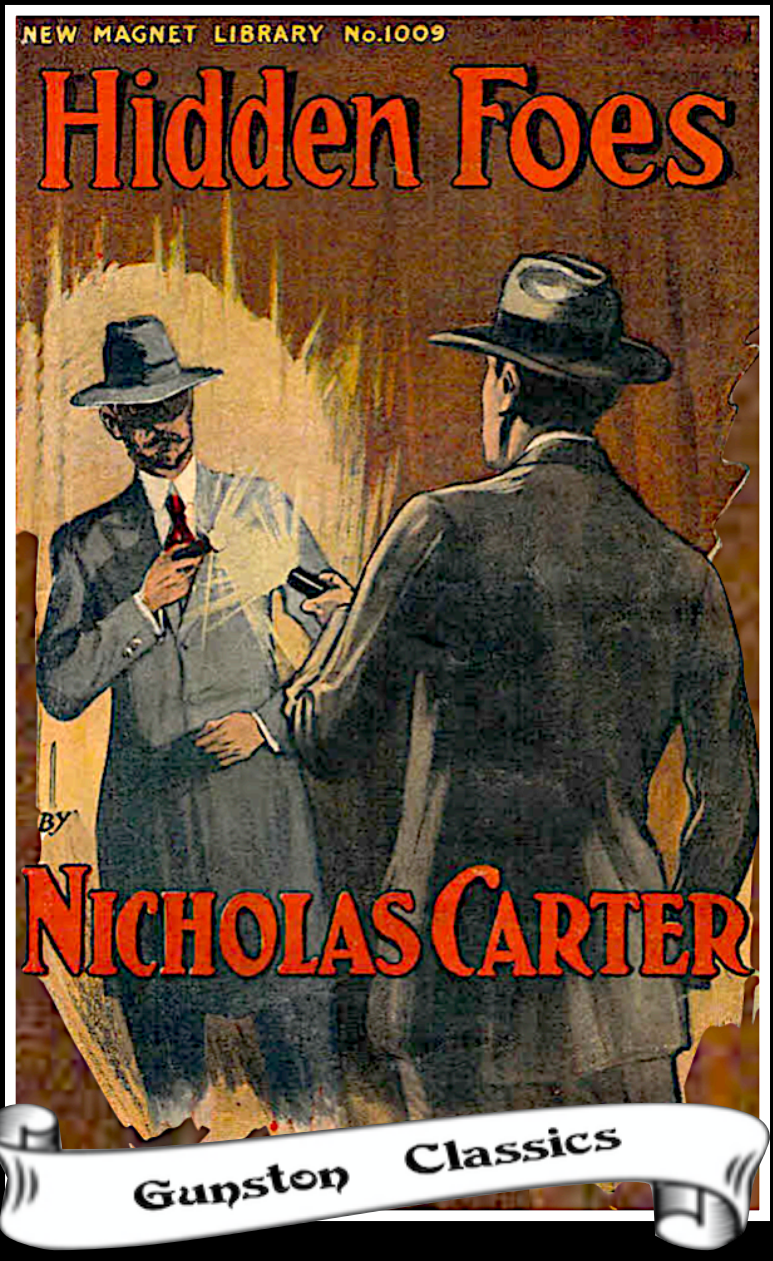
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Hidden Foes
BY
NICHOLAS CARTER
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Nick Carter - Hidden Foes

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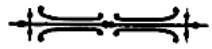
Detective - Nick Carter



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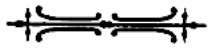
NICK CARTER STORIES

No. 1009

HIDDEN FOES.



CHAPTER I.
A MYSTERIOUS FATALITY.

Nobody had heard the report of a pistol.

There had been no disturbance; in fact, no audible altercation, no startling cry for help, or even a groan of sudden, terrible distress.

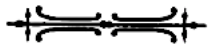
The man lay there as motionless, nevertheless, as if felled by a thunderbolt. His life had been snuffed out like the flame of a candle by the fury of a whirlwind. Death had come upon him like a bolt from the blue. By slow degrees his face underwent a change—but it was not the change that ordinarily follows sudden death,

that peaceful calm that marks the end of earthly toil and trouble.

Instead, the smoothly shaven skin seemed to shrink and wither slightly over the dead nerves and lifeless muscles, and a singular slaty hue that was hardly perceptible settled around his lips and nostrils, partly dispelling the first deathly pallor. It was as if the blast from a furnace, or the searing touch of a fiery hand, had withered and parched it.

He was a comparatively young man, not over thirty, and he was fashionably clad in a plaid business suit. He was lying flat on his back on the floor of the second-story corridor of a building known as the Waldmere Chambers, in the city of Madison.

Presently the door of one of the several adjoining rooms was opened and a stylish young woman emerged. She was clad for the street, and lingered to lock the door and put the key in her leather hand bag. Then she turned, and her gaze fell upon the prostrate man, several yards away and nearer the broad stairway leading down to the lower floor and the street door.



“Good heavens! Is he drunk?” she gasped, shrinking involuntarily.

She feared to approach him, though her hesitation was only momentary. For she heard the tread of some one on the stairs, obviously that of a man, and she ventured nearer just as the other appeared at the top of the stairs, a well-built, florid man of middle age.

“Oh, Doctor Perry, look here!” she cried excitedly. “What’s the matter with this man? Is he drunk or ill, or what is the——”

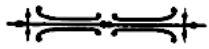
“Well, well, I don’t wonder you ask.” Doctor Perry approached and gazed down at him. “I don’t know, Miss Vernon. He appears to be——”

He stopped short; then crouched and raised the man’s arm, dropping it quickly. It fell back upon the floor as if made of clay.

“Heavens!” he exclaimed, rising hurriedly. “The man is dead.”

“Dead!” Miss Vernon echoed, turning pale.

“Stone dead. Do you know him?”



“No. I just came from my rooms to go to lunch and saw him lying here.”

“Did you hear him fall, or any disturbance, or— —”

“I heard nothing, Doctor Perry, not a sound.”

“We must call a policeman. I will wait here while you do so. Go down to the street and find an officer.”

“Won’t it be better to telephone? I can do so in a moment.”

“Yes, yes, in that case,” Doctor Perry nodded. “Hasten.”

Miss Vernon ran back and entered her rooms, on the door of which a modest brass plate stated that her business was that of a manicure and ladies’ hairdresser. She ran to a telephone in one of the attractively furnished rooms, crying quickly to the exchange operator:

“Give me the police headquarters. Hurry, please! It’s an emergency case.”

Seated with Chief Gleason in the latter’s private office when the telephone call was

received in the outer office was the celebrated American detective, Nicholas Carter, who had arrived in Madison early that morning with two of his assistants, and who then was discussing with the chief the business which had occasioned his visit, the nature of which will presently appear. They were interrupted by a police sergeant, who knocked and entered, saying quickly:

“A man has dropped dead, chief, in a corridor of the Waldmere Chambers. Shall I send the ambulance?”

“What man? Is he known?” Gleason questioned, swinging around in his swivel chair.

“No, sir.”

“Who informed you?”

“A woman telephoned that the body had just been found. Doctor Perry, the dentist, was watching it while she telephoned. His office is in the Waldmere Chambers. Neither of them knew the dead man.”

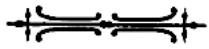
"Yes, send the ambulance," Chief Gleason directed. "You had better go, also, and look into the case. If——"

"One moment," Nick Carter interrupted. "I think I'll go with him, chief, if you don't mind."

"What need of that? It is merely a case of ——"

"We don't know what kind of a case it is, Gleason, at present," Carter cut in again. "A sudden death always warrants more or less suspicion. It is barely possible that this has some connection with the series of mysterious crimes that we have been discussing, and which has finally led you to call on me for assistance. Be that as it may ——"

"Hang it, Carter, I'll go with you myself, then," Gleason interrupted, rising and taking his cap. "You may be right, of course, and the chance is worth taking. You remain here, sergeant, but send along the ambulance. We'll take a taxi."



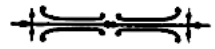
Chief Gleason started for the street while speaking, closely followed by the famous detective, and they were so fortunate as to find a taxicab just passing the headquarters building.

Thus it happened that Nicholas Carter arrived upon the scene of the sudden fatality scarcely ten minutes after it was discovered. He was not without an intuitive feeling, moreover, that he was to be confronted with a mystery of more than ordinary depth and obscurity, a case that would tax not only his rare detective genius, but also his skill, craft, and cunning in every department of his professional work.

“I think, Gleason, that you had better not mention my name while we are looking into this matter,” he remarked, as they were alighting from the taxicab.

“Very well,” Gleason readily assented. “But what do you expect to gain by suppressing it?”

“Just what is hard to say at this stage of the game,” Carter replied. “If all you have told



me is true, however, and Madison is afflicted with a crook whose crafty work has completely baffled your entire police department, it may be of some advantage to me, at least, if he does not immediately learn that I have been employed to run him down. That would serve only to put him on his guard."

"I see the point," Gleason nodded. "I agree with you, too."

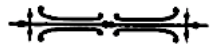
"The fact has not been disclosed, I understand."

"Only to a few members of the force, Carter; all of whom were ordered to say nothing about it. They may be trusted."

"Very good! If there should be occasion to introduce me to others, then, present me as Mr. Blaisdell," Carter directed. "That is the name under which I am registered at the Wilton House."

"Blaisdell—I'll bear it in mind."

"Come on, then," the detective added. "We are none too soon. A crowd is beginning to gather."



Their remarks had been made while they were entering the building. A group of men had collected at the top of the stairs. They were restrained by a policeman who had been called in from the street, and a passageway was hurriedly made for Chief Gleason and his companion. That the latter was the famous New York detective, not even the policeman then suspected.

The scene in the second-floor corridor was about what Nick Carter anticipated. Half a score of men and women had come from the adjoining rooms and offices and were gazing with mingled awe and consternation at the lifeless man on the floor. He was lying where he had fallen. A physician had been hurriedly summoned and was bending over him, engaged in making a superficial examination.

Chief Gleason started slightly when he beheld the upturned face of the dead man.

“Good heavens!” he muttered. “It’s Gaston Todd.”

Carter heard his muttered exclamation. Restraining him, at the same time furtively watching the physician, he said quietly:

"One moment, chief. Who is Gaston Todd? What about him?"

"He was born and brought up here," Gleason replied. "He had been in the stock brokerage business for ten years, cashier for Daly & Page. He was a clubman and a figure in society."

"Married?"

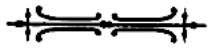
"No. He had a suite in the Wilton House. By Jove, it's barely possible that——"

"What is barely possible?"

"That you are right."

"Right in what respect? Tell me."

Carter had noticed the chief's hesitation, his dark frown, as if he had started to say something which discretion quickly led him to withhold. He demurred only for a moment, however, then explained with lowered voice:

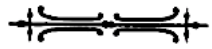


“Right, perhaps in thinking there is knavery back of this. There had been a feeling of bitter rivalry between Todd and a young local lawyer, Frank Paulding, who is an exceedingly impetuous and hot-headed chap. They had an ugly altercation in the Country Club last night, I have heard, and it is said that they nearly came to blows. That may have ended it, of course, though this sudden death of Todd, following it so quickly——”

“Is somewhat significant,” Nick Carter put in quietly. “I agree with you. In what have the two men been rivals?”

“For the hand of Edna Thurlow, by far the most beautiful and accomplished girl in Madison. She inherited half a million when her father died. Her mother, Mrs. Mortimer Thurlow, is also very wealthy and fashionable. She’s the acknowledged leader of the local smart set. The two men may have met here this morning. Possibly the fight of last night was resumed, resulting in ——”

“Let it go at that,” the detective interrupted. “The physician has ended his examination.”



CHAPTER II.
NICK CARTER'S OPINION.

Chief Gleason immediately turned and approached the rising physician, asking a bit brusquely:

"Well, Doctor Doyle, what do you make of it? The man is dead?"

"Yes, indeed, there is no question about that, Mr. Gleason."

"What was the cause?"

"It appears to be a case of heart disease."

"Are you sure of it?"

"One cannot be absolutely sure, Mr. Gleason, without performing an autopsy," Doctor Doyle said blandly, while he wiped his fingers with his handkerchief. "I feel

reasonably sure. There is no wound that I can discover, nor does there appear to be any indication of foul play. Yes, I feel reasonably sure of it," he repeated.

"You don't think, then, that there is any occasion to notify the coroner?" Gleason said inquiringly.

"There seems to be none. I have no doubt that the man died from natural causes. There is no superficial evidence to the contrary, or any— —"

Doctor Doyle broke off abruptly, his gaze having fallen upon the detective, who had passed back of the couple and approached the body.

Carter then was bending over it, and with his finger had raised one of Todd's eyelids. He studied the ball and pupil for several seconds, then took a

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powerful lens from his pocket and inspected the dead man's face and lips. He looked up after a moment and said:

“I don’t agree with you, doctor. This man appears to have been a very strong and rugged fellow.”

“That is true, sir, as far as it goes,” Doctor Doyle admitted, frowning slightly when his professional opinion was thus questioned by a stranger.

“It seems hardly probable that such a man died of heart disease,” the detective said pointedly. “Nor do his eyes denote that apoplexy was the cause.”

“You will have to go deeper, sir, nevertheless, to find positive evidence of the cause,” Doctor Doyle said, rather coldly. “Superficial evidence is not absolutely convincing.”

“Have you noticed this slight discoloration of the skin near the mouth and nostrils?”

“Yes, of course.”

“How do you account for that?”

“Such slight changes immediately after death are not uncommon,” said the

physician. “There may be a slight settlement of blood in the tissues in that locality.”

“You would not attribute it to a blow?”

“Surely not. There could be no mistaking the evidence of a violent blow.”

“But the skin appears to be slightly withered,” said Carter. “Minute wrinkles are discernible with my lens, particularly in the thin skin of the lips.”

“That may be easily explained.”

“How so?”

“Death may have been preceded by a sudden terrible

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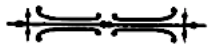
pain, causing a contraction of the lips, and what may be termed a pinched condition of the nerves and muscles in that locality. They may not have relaxed yet, which causes the drawn appearance of the skin which, you say, is discernible with your lens. No, I do not wish to examine it more closely. I don’t think it signifies anything.”

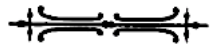


“I do,” said the detective, rising abruptly. “I think— —”

“One moment, gentlemen.” The interruption came from Doctor Perry, the dentist, who still was among the people then gathered in the corridor. “Here is Professor Graff, the chemist. His opinion ought to be valuable in a case of this kind.”

Nicholas Carter turned to gaze at the man who then was approaching.

Professor Graff had come from a room at the rear end of the corridor, and he appeared surprised that something unusual had occurred, evidently having heard none of the disturbance. He was a man of medium build, somewhat bowed, and appeared to be about sixty years old. His hair and beard were gray, his complexion sallow, his expression serious and reserved. He wore gold-bowed spectacles and looked as if he might be of German or Swedish extraction. He was clad for the street, wearing a soft felt hat and a coat with a cape, a style augmenting his foreign appearance.



“Dear me, what has happened?” he said gravely, while others made way for him to approach. “A gentleman injured—not dead, is he?”

“Yes.” Doctor Perry drew him nearer. “He was found lying here a few minutes ago.”

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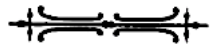
“I heard nothing. I have just come up from my laboratory. Why, why, this is Mr. Gaston Todd,” Professor Graff added amazedly, manifestly shocked by the discovery. “I cannot be mistaken. I have seen him frequently in the Wilton House.”

“There is no question as to his identity,” replied the dentist, who appeared to be the only person acquainted with the chemist. “There is a difference of opinion between Doctor Doyle and this gentleman, however, as to the possible cause of his death. They ——”

“Let me explain,” the detective interposed, addressing the chemist. “It will take me only a few minutes.”



“Why, yes, certainly,” Professor Graff bowed, regarding the detective a bit curiously.

Carter turned again to the body, briefly pointing out the conditions he already had mentioned, and then added earnestly:

“Use my lens. You can see more distinctly.”

Professor Graff smiled faintly and shook his head.

“Really, sir, there is no occasion,” he replied. “My opinion in such a matter is worthless. I know nothing about such things. I am a chemist, not a physician. I can subject the physical organs to analysis and detect poisons, or other foreign substances, perhaps; but I would not wish to pass upon the conditions you have mentioned. It seems only reasonable to me, however, that Doctor Doyle’s opinion ought to be entirely reliable.”

“I think he will find it so,” said the latter, as Professor Graff moved away and descended the stairs.

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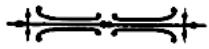

Nick Carter did not longer argue the point. Instead, turning to Chief Gleason, he whispered quietly:

"You had better be governed by my opinion, nevertheless, and take the necessary steps to insure an autopsy."

"You really think, then, that——"

"Never mind what I really think. I'll see you later and inform you. You will make no mistake, however, in doing what I direct. Take it from me, Gleason, this man was—murdered."

"Murdered? Why do you——"

"Hush!" Nick quietly cautioned. "There will be nothing in immediately disclosing my suspicion. It will be better to conceal it temporarily. Has this man a family?"

"No; no family."

"Or relatives who will be likely to interfere?"

"I think not. I am quite sure of it, in fact."

“Very good. Notify the coroner, then, and have him take the necessary steps to perform an autopsy later,” the detective directed. “Understand?”

“Perfectly,” Chief Gleason nodded. “I will see to it.”

“And I will see you later, also the coroner, and explain my position,” Carter added. “Just now I have something else in view and must get a move on. Mum’s the word, mind you, until after the autopsy.”

He did not wait for an answer. He turned away and quickly departed, leaving his observers wondering who he was and what he had said, his instructions having been imparted in subdued and hurried whispers.

Returning to the street, Carter consulted a directory

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in a drug store, and five minutes later he entered the Gratton Building and approached the office of the lawyer whom the chief had mentioned. He listened at the

door for a moment, hearing nothing, and then opened it and entered.

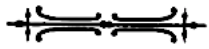
A tall, clean-cut man of thirty swung around in his swivel chair from a rolltop desk. He was of light complexion, with a smoothly shaved, attractive face, and frank blue eyes. He was alone and looked a bit curiously at his visitor, who, glancing sharply around the well-equipped office, appeared somewhat surprised, and said:

“Pardon me. Are you Mr. Paulding?”

“Yes, I am, sir.”

“I thought I saw Mr. Gaston Todd come in here a moment ago. Was I mistaken?”

“Humph!” Paulding straightened up with an expressive grunt. “Yes, sir, very much mistaken. Todd never comes here, nor would it be wise for him to do so. I would fire him out, head, neck, and heels, before he could open his mouth. You may repeat that to him, if you like and are a friend of his. I would say the same to Todd himself.”



Nick laughed, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and surveyed with quizzical eye the somewhat impulsive speaker.

"Oh, I'm no friend of Todd," he replied. "I know him only by sight. There is a little matter, however, about which I would like to question him."

"All right, in that case, and I'll do all I can to help you," Paulding said more agreeably. "I saw him in the Waldmere Chambers about fifteen minutes

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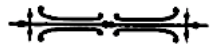
ago. He still is there, perhaps, if you care to seek him."

"In the rooms of one of the tenants, or— —"

"No. He was in the second-floor corridor," Paulding interrupted. "He appeared to be waiting for some one. I passed him when I came out."

"Did you speak to him?"

"Not by a long chalk. I speak to Todd only under protest and when it cannot be avoided.



That's all I can tell you. You may find him there, perhaps."

Nick Carter had accomplished his object. He was a keen physiognomist and could read faces and characters much less frank and outspoken than those of this lawyer. He now was absolutely sure, in fact, that Paulding knew nothing about Todd's death, nor had even heard of it. He smiled and replied:

"Much obliged. Sorry to have troubled you."

"No trouble at all, sir."

"May I ask, Mr. Paulding, what took you to the Waldmere Chambers?"

"I went there to confer with a client who ——" Paulding broke off abruptly, gazing more sharply at the detective, then frowningly added: "But why do you ask why I went there? What is it to you? It strikes me that you are deucedly inquisitive."

"I agree with you," said Nick, coolly placing a chair near that of the lawyer and sitting down. "There is serious occasion for it, Mr. Paulding, as I now will explain: I happen to

know that Mr. Gaston Todd has not left that second-floor corridor in the Waldmere Chambers. He was found dead there immediately after you left the building."

"Dead—found dead!" Paulding stared amazedly.

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"What are you saying? Do you really mean it—that Gaston Todd is—dead!"

If Nick had had even a lingering shadow of suspicion, it would have been instantly dispelled by the expression of the lawyer's face. It was one that no man could have feigned, however accomplished an actor. He bowed and replied:

"Yes, Mr. Paulding, that is precisely what I mean. Gaston Todd is dead."

"Dear me, I can hardly believe it. It seems utterly incredible. Found dead, you say ——"

"Exactly. Where you last saw him. He was ——"

"Stop a moment! What do you imply by that?"

Paulding's face had changed like a flash. His brows fell and his eyes took on a threatening gleam and glitter. He lurched forward in his chair, adding quickly:

"Why did you say he was found immediately after I left the building, and where I last saw him? What are you insinuating? What are you trying to put over on me? Why, if you knew he was dead, did you come here to pretend you were seeking him? Who the devil are you, that you impose upon me in this way, implying that I ——"

"Here is my card," the detective blandly interposed, tendering it. "You may, perhaps, know me by name."

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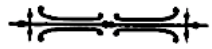
CHAPTER III.

A FRIEND WORTH HAVING.



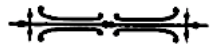
Nick Carter smiled amusedly when Frank Paulding, having fairly snatched the card and read it, straightened up in his chair and stared at him with almost ludicrous astonishment.

"Nicholas Carter!" he exclaimed; "the New York detective! Good gracious!"

"Is it so very amazing?" the detective asked dryly.

"Yes, by Jove, it is," said Paulding, pulling himself together. "I do, indeed, know you by name, and who does not? Let the circumstances be what they may, too, I am very glad to become acquainted with you. I am not blind, nevertheless, to the fact that your visit is rather significant; decidedly so, in reality, in view of your duplicity and covert insinuations that——"

"That you know something about Todd's sudden death," Nick put in, checking him. "Don't let that annoy you. I did so, Mr. Paulding, only to assure myself to the contrary. I have succeeded, too, completely."



“But what was the occasion?” Paulding questioned. “I don’t see, Mr. Carter, why you thought I knew anything about it.”

“I did not really think so,” Nick said dryly. “I foresaw, however, what others possibly will think, sooner or later, and I wanted to look at you and take your measure before circumstances might make it difficult

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for me to do so with absolute certainty. He is a wise man and keen, you know, who anticipates coming events.”

“By Jove, I fail to get you, Mr. Carter,” Paulding said more seriously. “Take my measure, eh? What others will possibly think? Say, you don’t—you don’t mean that —that Gaston Todd was killed, do you? Not that he was—murdered?”

Nick glanced at the door, to be sure that he had closed it. He then replied more impressively:

“I am a stranger to you, Mr. Paulding, but you will make no mistake in meeting me

halfway and taking my advice. I frequently am a good friend to have in time of trouble."

"I know of none I would rather have," Paulding said quickly.

"That goes, does it?"

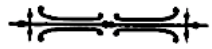
"You bet it goes."

"What now passes between us, then, must be strictly confidential," said the detective. "You must, moreover, be governed by my instructions. You will presently see, I think, that that will be the only wise course for you to shape. If you are not inclined to meet me in this way——"

"But I am," Paulding cut in earnestly. "I'm not blind. I now see there is something wrong, Mr. Carter, and that you are here in my behalf. I would be more than a fool, sir, if I did not take advantage of your offer. I promise in advance to do what you direct."

"Very good," Nick said approvingly. "You will not regret it."

"But how am I in wrong?" Paulding asked anxiously.



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“Has a crime been committed? Was Todd murdered?”

“I think so,” said the detective.

“Good heavens! Is it possible that I am suspected of——”

“One moment, Paulding, and I will tell you about it.”

He then stated the circumstances briefly, in so far as he had figured in the case, and then added pointedly:

“You now can see why I wanted to talk with you, Paulding, and get your measure.”

“Yes, yes, I see,” Paulding nodded. “But how did you know that I passed Todd in the corridor just before he died, or was killed? I saw no one else. I am sure, too, that no one saw me. How did you know I had just left there?”

“For two reasons,” Nick replied. “One, because you told me so.”

“I told you so?” Paulding stared perplexedly.

"In effect," smiled the detective. "You said you had passed Todd about fifteen minutes ago, and I knew that was just about when his body was discovered."

"Ah, I see. You are a keen reasoner, Mr. Carter. You said there were two reasons, however."

"The other can be briefly stated: Todd did not look to me like a man who had dropped dead of any organic trouble. He looked like a strong and healthful fellow. I very soon suspected murder; and, after having been told of your fight with Todd in the Country Club last night, I reasoned that you had just met him, perhaps, and been seen by some person who, for some reason and knowing all of the circumstances,

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had taken advantage of them to craftily kill Todd and fix the crime upon you, assuming that you had not done it. That's why I lost no time in sizing you up from personal observation. I wanted to do so before you heard of Todd's death, in case you were

innocent, of which I was quickly convinced. Have I made it plain to you?"

"Perfectly plain, Mr. Carter," Paulding said earnestly. "I am more than grateful. I don't know how I can repay you for your interest in me, a stranger——"

"Don't speak of that," the detective interrupted. "I am interested in serving justice, mind you, and am taking what seems to be the best way. I am not absolutely sure that Todd was murdered. An autopsy will determine that. If he was, at such a time and in such a public place, without any disturbance or any superficial wound, it was accomplished by most extraordinary means and by a knave of exceeding boldness and ability, who may be equally as skillful in hiding his identity and covering his tracks. That's why I have tackled the case in the bud, so to speak, in anticipation of what may follow."

"I understand," said Paulding. "It now is perfectly plain."

“We’ll get right down to business, then, for I wish you to answer a few questions,” Carter replied.

“As many as you wish, Mr. Carter, and to the best of my ability.”

“Very good. Todd appeared to be waiting for some one, you have said.”

“Yes. That was my impression.”

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“Do you know for whom, or how long he had been there?”

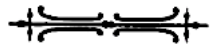
“No, neither.”

“Do you know of any person whom he visits, who has rooms or an office in that building?”

“I do not. He was not the type of man I fancied, Mr. Carter, and we never have been good friends.”

“I was told that he was a popular clubman.”

“He was, I admit, and there are many who liked him.”



“What was the trouble between you last evening?” the detective inquired. “I was told — —”

“I can tell you in a nutshell,” Paulding interrupted. “He spoke of a young lady in terms that no gentleman should have used. I called him down, Mr. Carter. One word led to another, and we nearly came to blows. That’s all there was to it, however, for others interposed and Todd immediately left the clubhouse. I did not see him again until we met this morning in the Waldmere Chambers.”

“Do you know anything against him, so far as his character and habits are concerned?”

“Well, no,” said Paulding, after a moment. “He was somewhat dissipated at times and in with the fast set. He gambled more or less on the quiet, and I know he was friendly with other women while paying attention to — —”

“To Miss Thurlow,” put in Carter, when the lawyer hesitated. “Her name was mentioned

to me, also, and the fact that a bitter rivalry existed between you and Todd."

"Well, there is some truth in that," Paulding admitted,

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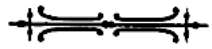
flushing. "Regardless of my affection and whether she really cares for me, Mr. Carter, I never considered Todd a fit man for Edna Thurlow. I would not have permitted him to visit a sister of mine, if I had one. Edna is young, however; only nineteen, and it's not difficult for a man of Todd's type to deceive an inexperienced girl. I do not mean by that, Mr. Carter, that he would not have cared to marry her. He was out to get her, if possible, and— —"

"So are you, Paulding, aren't you?" Nick interrupted. "Tell me frankly."

"Yes, indeed, I am, Mr. Carter, if she'll have me."

"Do you think she will?"

"I hope so, think so, in fact, though I have not yet ventured to ask her. Bear in mind,



Mr. Carter, that she is wealthy, prominent socially, and a very beautiful and accomplished girl, while I am only a struggling lawyer, bucking up against a hard game, and with only patronage and income enough to keep me going. But I'll make good, all right, and then——"

"I think you will, Paulding," the detective again interposed. "Let it go at that, now, for my time is limited. I wish to give you a few instructions, which you must follow to the letter."

"I will do so," Paulding assured him. "You may rely upon that."

"Much may depend upon it," Carter said impressively. "As I have said, nevertheless, I am not absolutely sure that Todd was murdered. Nor, if he was, am I sure that you will be seriously involved, or even suspected. I think you may be, however,

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for the reason stated, and you must in that case do precisely what I direct."

“I certainly will, Mr. Carter,” Mr. Paulding again said earnestly.

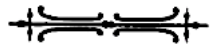
“To begin with, then, say nothing about this interview, or the fact that we have met and that I am interested in the case,” Nick directed. “Do not confide in any one, not excepting Miss Thurlow, even, in case you are arrested and charged with the crime.”

“Good heavens! Do you anticipate that?” Paulding asked anxiously.

“It is possible, if not probable,” the detective replied. “You must, in that case, do precisely as if we had not met. Say not a word about me until I countermand these instructions. My presence in Madison is not generally known, and, while looking into this matter, as well as other business that brought me here, I may derive an advantage from concealing the fact.”

“I understand, and will act accordingly.”

“You may assert your innocence, employ another lawyer, get bail if you can, and all that—but not a word about me.”



"That goes," Paulding nodded. "I'll be as dumb as an oyster."

"Very good," said Carter, extending his hand and rising to go. "I will make it a point to see you as soon as possible, in case you are arrested, but do not under any circumstances send for me. On the other hand, do not fear that I will desert you. I shall know all that is going on and will be hard at work for you."

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"That's good enough for me," declared Paulding, warmly pressing the detective's hand. "You can bank on me, Mr. Carter, let come what may—as I'm going to bank on you."

"Good enough, then," the detective added. "We'll wait and see how the cat jumps."

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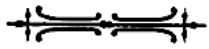
CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN OF LAST RESORT.

Nicholas Carter did not return to the Waldmere Chambers after his interview with



Frank Paulding. It was not entirely due to his intuitive perception, or to any evidence definitely involving another, that had caused him to feel that Paulding had played no part in the killing of Gaston Todd, and that he might be possibly the victim of a carefully planned conspiracy.

It was due in part to what Chief Gleason had told him earlier that morning, when they were discussing the business that had brought him secretly to Madison with his two most reliable assistants.

Nick saw nothing to be gained by returning to the Waldmere Chambers, and he hastened to the Wilton House, instead, going at once to the suite assigned him, where Chick and Patsy then were waiting for him.

“Well, there must be something doing, indeed,” Chick exclaimed, gazing at him when he entered. “Has it taken Gleason the entire morning to tell you why we are needed in Madison?”

“No, not quite,” Carter replied, taking a chair. “There is more doing than what

Gleason confided to me, Chick, and I think there may be some connection between them. Unless I am very much mistaken, there was a deucedly singular murder committed about an hour ago."

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"The devil you say!" Chick returned. "Have you been looking into it?"

"Superficially."

"Tell us, chief," said Patsy, with immediate interest. "Why singular?"

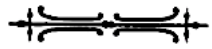
"I will do so presently," Nick replied. "I first will tell you why Chief Gleason sent for me. It's a rather remarkable story."

"A mysterious crime, chief?"

"Quite a number of them, Patsy."

"Gee whiz! We are booked for some hard work, then, if the local police cannot handle them."

"Crimes of what kind, chief?" Chick inquired.



"The first was committed several months ago," said Carter, disposing of the match with which he had been lighting a cigar. "It was the robbery of a prominent local banker, named Wagner, whose statements are entirely reliable."

"What were the circumstances?"

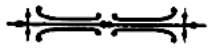
"Briefly stated, he was going home from his club about nine o'clock one evening, after having dined there with a friend. He is a well-built, powerful man of forty, about the last whom a holdup man would venture to tackle. He wore some valuable jewelry, however, and he had nearly a thousand dollars in his pocket, which he wanted to use before banking hours the following morning."

"The crook may have known about it."

"Possibly, though Wagner doesn't think so."

"Where was the crime committed?"

"In the grounds of his own house, a fine residence in Garside Avenue. He was sauntering up a gravel walk leading to his front door, when a man came



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down from the veranda and approached to meet him. Wagner did not recognize him, but he naturally inferred that the stranger had called to see him, and, not finding him at home, that he was about departing."

"Certainly," Chick nodded. "That was perfectly natural."

"What followed was quite the contrary," Carter remarked dryly. "The stranger stopped directly in front of him and asked whether he was Mr. Wagner. He had an unlighted cigar in his mouth, or so Wagner has stated. The latter replied in the affirmative, of course, and asked what was wanted."

"And then, chief?" queried Patsy.

"Then came the one singular feature of the case," said the detective. "Wagner felt a sensation as if a breath of air had hit his face. He doesn't know where it came from, nor can he explain it, for the stranger still had the cigar between his lips and his mouth was closed. Be that as it may, Wagner

instantly felt very numb and confused, and in another moment he lost consciousness."

"Fainted away?"

"Not quite that, Patsy."

"Great guns! What was he up against, chief?"

"That's the question," said Nick. "He was seen on the gravel walk a little later by a passing policeman, who hastened to aid him. Wagner still was unconscious, dead to the world, as he afterward expressed it when revived by a physician. He had been robbed of his money and all of his jewelry, and the thief had disappeared, leaving absolutely no clew to his identity."

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"He has not been traced, nor any of the jewelry?"

"Neither."

"Is any one suspected?"

"No." Nick shook his head. "There have been numerous other robberies of a like character, and under similar circumstances,

but in no case has any of the stolen property been recovered, nor a clew to the criminal been found. The police have been at work for months on more than a score of such cases."

"By Jove! that's very peculiar," Chick said thoughtfully. "Is the description of the crook the same in all cases?"

"Far from it," Carter replied. "They vary materially."

"There must be a gang at work, then."

"It appears so."

"Did the victim in each case experience the same sensations as those described by Wagner?"

"Very similar, though the circumstances were not always the same. All agree, however, that they suddenly became unconscious from an unknown cause, while talking with a person who had accosted them on one pretense or another. One stock broker was robbed in that way while alone in his business office. The police are all at sea, and the community is on nettles as to

who will be the next victim of the mysterious and elusive plunderers. That's why Gleason sent secretly for me to aid him."

"How do you size it up, chief?" Patsy inquired. "What do you make of it?"

"Well, take the case of Wagner," Carter replied. "He is very much mystified by the breath of air he

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felt on his face. His assailant's lips were closed around a cigar, and Wagner is sure he could not have exhaled the breath he suddenly felt."

"Surely not, chief, in that case," said Patsy.

"Don't be so sure of it," Carter returned. "When a man confronts another and has a full-length cigar between his teeth, the outer end of it may be very near the other's face."

"That's true, chief, but what of it?"

"Suppose it was not a cigar, but made to closely resemble one?"

“Gee whiz! I get you,” cried Patsy. “You mean a tube through which one’s breath might be blown.”

“I mean a tube, Patsy, which contained something that may have been forced outward by the man’s breath, and so directed that Wagner must have inhaled it,” Carter explained.

“I see.”

“Just what it was, being powerful enough to immediately overcome him, and how the tube was constructed so that the user would not be affected by its contents when ejecting it, are open questions.”

“Do you really think that is how it was done?” Chick inquired, a bit incredulous.

“I certainly do,” nodded the detective.

“Had Gleason thought of that device, or any of the police?”

“No, nor did I inform him,” said Carter, smiling significantly. “Since we are about to investigate these mysterious cases, which I

have decided to do, we may derive an advantage by not disclosing our suspicions."

"Certainly," Chick agreed. "That's good judgment. It may be, chief, that the crook has discovered

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an odorless and very powerful narcotic gas; also various methods by which he can craftily and quickly administer it."

"Something of that nature, Chick, which also indicates that he is a man of education, with a knowledge of drugs and mechanics," Carter pointed out. "All this is what leads me to think there may be some connection between these numerous strange robberies and the mysterious killing of Gaston Todd this noon, if an autopsy shows positively that he was murdered."

"That's the case you mentioned?"

"Yes. I now will tell you about it."

The detective proceeded to do so, covering all of the essential points, both during his

observations in the Waldmere Chambers and his call upon Frank Paulding.

“By Jove! this case does have a striking likeness to the others,” Chick declared, after listening attentively. “It may be a murder case, as you suspect.”

“The similarity first led me to suspect it.”

“Naturally.”

“There are three other cases, too, about which Gleason told me, that are fully as peculiar,” Carter added, knocking the ashes from his cigar.

“What are they, chief?” questioned Patsy.

“They involve three girls, or, more properly, young women, for all are about twenty,” said the detective. “All were found unconscious in the grounds of the local hospital.”

“At the same time?”

“No. There was an interval of several days between them.”

“Found when?”

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“About midnight.”

“Had they been robbed?”

“No. There was no robbery in either case, nor has it been learned that an outrage of any kind was attempted,” Nick explained. “Each of the girls was first taken to the police headquarters, I understand, and afterward sent to the hospital, where one of the physicians soon succeeded in reviving her. She then was allowed to depart, after stating that she could not account for her strange condition, nor remember anything that had befallen her.”

“By gracious, that is peculiar, chief, for fair,” declared Patsy, gazing perplexedly.

“More strange, perhaps, and somewhat significant, is the fact that not one of these girls could afterward be found by the police, when they tumbled to a possibility that the three cases might have some relation to the many mysterious robberies.”

“Their names are not known?”

"So Gleason states. It appears that they were not learned by the hospital authorities."

"The whole business does seem strange, indeed," Chick said more gravely. "It looks as if we were up against a very curious and complicated mess."

"And crooks of extraordinary craft and cunning," put in Patsy earnestly.

"I agree with both of you," said Nick, glancing at his watch. "Come, we are due for a late lunch. I will make further inquiries this afternoon, and then—well, I will have decided by evening how we can begin our work. The autopsy to-morrow may show us the way."

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CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER STRANGE CASE.

The steeple bell of a church within a stone's throw of Hamilton Square struck twelve. The successive strokes fell with monotonous reverberations on the midnight air, breaking

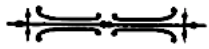
with solemn resonance the quietude of that reputable residential section of Madison.

For Hamilton Square, though not far from the business district, was in an attractive part of the city, to which the extensive tract of land had been donated years before, in part for a public square and the remainder for the site, park, and gardens of the now locally famous Osgood Hospital, established by the donor, and still largely supported by the income from his bequests.

The last stroke of the bell scarce had died away to a customary stillness, when a burly policeman, one James Donovan, appeared on one side of the square flanking the hospital grounds, moving along near the iron fence and pausing now and then to gaze across the broad avenue at the opposite dwellings, the most of which were shrouded in darkness.

Presently, approaching a gate in the fence, he muttered to himself:

“I may as well have another look. It’s a hundred to one there has been nothing



doing, though, or I would have heard it. This evidently isn't one of the

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nights for their devilish doings. Hang it, I'm not sure of it!"

He had stopped short, taking out his electric lamp and flashing the beam of light on the ornamental gate. A padlock had been removed and was lying on the gravel walk within. Nearly at his feet, discovered after a brief search, was a piece of black thread.

"By thunder, I was wrong," Donovan muttered, gazing around and scowling perplexedly. "Have my ears gone back on me? Has this scurvy trick been turned again? Some one has been through this gate since I tied the thread on it. I'll darned soon find out."

Quietly lifting the latch, Donovan opened the gate and entered with quickened steps. He did not follow the gravel walk, which led toward an end door in a wing of the hospital some fifty yards away. Instead, he strode straight across the broad lawn, through the

deeper gloom under the trees, until he came to one, the drooping branches of which formed a sort of arbor in a secluded part of the extensive estate.

There was an iron seat under it, and the policeman flashed his light in that direction. It fell upon a motionless figure in a huddled position on one end of the seat—the figure of a young woman.

"Another, by thunder, as sure as I'm a foot high," Donovan gasped audibly. "In spite of my vigilance, too, and in the same place and condition as the others. Sure, this beats me."

Donovan drew nearer and bent over the motionless girl. She was about nineteen, with a slender,

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neatly clad figure, a dark skirt and Eton jacket. Her head was bowed forward, and her hat was somewhat awry. She was of dark complexion, but the ghastly pallor of her cheeks caused the policeman to catch his breath. He bowed over her, listening, and

presently could hear the faint breathing of the unconscious girl.

"By Jove, I feared for a moment she was gone," he said to himself, straightening up. "I'll try to raise the sergeant. He said he'd show up about midnight."

Donovan walked away toward the gate again and blew his whistle, a shrill, sinister sound on the night air. Thrice he had to sound it, and then he heard a distant reply. Several moments later hurried footsteps fell on the pavement, and an officer in plain clothes appeared at the gate.

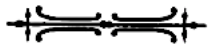
"That you, Jim?" he called quietly.

"Yes, sir." Donovan's hand went to his helmet. "I thought I might get you, Sergeant Brady, as you said you'd drop around about this time."

"Something doing?"

"Yes, sir, the same old job."

"The devil you say! Have you seen no one, nor heard anything?"



“Not a soul, sir, nor a sound,” Donovan declared, approaching the gate. “Faith, I think my eyes and ears have gone to the bad. I was round here twenty minutes ago. The padlock then was on the gate, and this thread, tied so that the gate could not be opened without breaking it, was just as I had fixed it. It’s a cinch, now, that this is the gate the rascals have been using. The chief thought, you know, that

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the padlock might have been taken off only for a blind. The breaking of the thread settles it.”

“That’s a clever scheme, Jim,” Brady said approvingly. “Yes, yes, undoubtedly that’s the gate. Another woman, you say?”

“Yes, sir, and on the same iron seat.”

“I’ll have a look at her.”

“This way, sergeant.”

“The fourth in a fortnight.” Brady spoke with a growl while he and his companion strode across the lawn. “I don’t understand

it. I'll be hanged, Jim, if I can make head or tail to a mystery of this kind. I don't see why it's done, or who could quit a winner."

"Faith, it's as black as dock mud," Donovan vouchsafed grimly. "Here she is, sergeant, dead to the world."

Brady stopped and gazed down at the inanimate girl—the fourth who had been found on this same seat, at the same time, and in the same condition, within two weeks.

"Humph!" Brady grunted, rubbing his furrowed brow perplexedly. "Mystery is no name for it."

"Shall I send in an ambulance call?"

"No. It's another case for the hospital. There's nothing in taking her to headquarters and then bringing her back here, as was done in the other three cases."

"Sure, sergeant, that's right."

"Go to that wing door and raise one of the attendants. Tell him what's up, Jim, and

have him bring out a litter. I'll wait here until you return."

Donovan hurried away and vanished around a corner

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of the wing. He returned in about five minutes, accompanied by one of the hospital attendants, bearing a folded litter, which he hastened to open and on which he and the policeman placed the girl.

While they were doing so, Brady discovered a small leather hand bag on the ground near the seat. He picked it up and tossed it on the litter.

"Go ahead," he commanded, a bit gruffly. "Get a move on. I'll go with you."

His companions picked up their burden and obeyed. They trooped across the grounds and around the end of the wing, bringing up at a door over which a red lantern was burning. It was opened by an orderly within, and Donovan said familiarly:

“Here’s another for you, Bill, of the same sort. Faith, they seem to drop out of the sky.”

“They more likely are sent up from the infernal regions, judging from the character of the job,” returned the orderly. “What’s the matter with you guns, anyway, that tricks of this kind can be repeated under your very eyes? Bring her this way.”

He conducted them through a dimly lighted corridor and into an adjoining room, in which there were several unoccupied cots, on one of which Donovan and the attendant placed the girl.

The orderly turned to a wall telephone and summoned a night nurse, who entered before he had fairly hung up the receiver.

“What physician is here, Agnes?” he asked curtly.

“Doctor Green has been here since eight o’clock,” said the nurse. “I just saw a light in Doctor Devoll’s private room. I think he came in about ten minutes ago.”

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“Notify him,” said the orderly. “He can restore her, most likely, since he was so successful in the other three cases. Notify him at once.”

The woman turned to the telephone to speak to Doctor Devoll, while the orderly set about making a few necessary preparations to receive him, apparently disregarding the presence of the two policemen.

Sergeant Brady, who had been gazing with a suspicious frown at the girl on the cot, turned to the attendant who had assisted in bringing her in.

“Doctor Devoll is the head physician, isn’t he?” he asked quietly.

“Yes, sir,” said the attendant. “He runs the place.”

“The big finger, eh?”

“That’s what.”

“I have heard he’s very skillful.”

“None better, sir.”

“I wonder——” Brady dropped his voice to a whisper: “I wonder whether there’s a telephone I can use on the quiet. I want to talk with Chief Gleason, at headquarters.”

“Sure,” the attendant nodded. “There’s one in the operating room. No one is there now. I’ll show you.”

“Half a minute,” Brady muttered. Then, turning to Donovan, he whispered: “Have an eye on the girl, Jim, and keep your ears open when she revives. Get me?”

“Sure!”

“I’ll return in time to leave with you.”

Donovan nodded, and Brady immediately departed with the attendant. Only five minutes had passed when Doctor Devoll entered the room, bringing a

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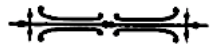
leather medicine case and quickly approaching the cot on which lay the inanimate girl, whose jacket and the front of her silk shirt waist had been opened by the nurse.



Doctor Devoll presented quite a striking picture, when he paused and gazed down at her in the bright light of an electric bulb. He was close upon sixty and of medium height, but very slender. His thinness was accentuated by a tight-fitting black frock coat, the skirts of which hung to his knees. His head was almost entirely bald. All that remained to show that he was a son of Esau was a fringe of close-cut, gray hair around the base of his skull, and a single silver-white tuft above his high forehead.

He was smoothly shaven, his features wasted and wan, his thin lips of a dull, grayish tint, instead of a wholesome red, as if the blood in his veins had lost its crimson hue. His nose was long, his eyes a cold blue and wonderfully penetrating. As he stood there with his slender hands behind him, his fingers interlocked, there was something really quite sinister in his aspect. He looked not unlike a bird of prey brooding over his victim.

This was immediately dispelled, however, when he looked up at the nurse and said,

with a remarkably soft and ingratiating voice:

"She appears to be in the same condition, Agnes, as the others. She was found on the same seat, did I understand you to say?"

"Yes, doctor." The nurse bowed to him across the narrow cot. "This policeman discovered her. He had her brought in, sir, instead of taking her to the station house, as before."

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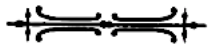
Doctor Devoll turned and eyed Donovan narrowly for a moment; then suavely inquired:

"Is your beat in this locality?"

"It is, sir," said Donovan respectfully. "I'm the night patrolman, sir."

"Are you the officer who previously found the other girls who were brought here under similar circumstances?"

"I am, sir."



“Did you see any one to-night, or hear anything, that might shed a ray of light on this mystery?”

“I did not, sir,” said Donovan. “I’m all in the dark. I’m blessed if I can fathom how and when the girl went there. I had my eyes open all the evening because of the other cases, but how——”

“Yes, yes, no doubt.” Doctor Devoll checked him with a deprecatory gesture. “I must apply for more night men in this district, if these extraordinary episodes are to continue. The cause must be found and the culprits discovered. That is, of course, if it’s a case for the police.”

“She may be a drug fiend, sir, or perhaps ——”

“It is useless to speculate,” Doctor Devoll interrupted. “I could learn nothing from the others. I will try this one.”

He opened his medicine case while speaking, taking from it a small sponge and a slender vial filled with an amber-colored fluid, a few drops of which he poured on the

sponge. Then he held it with his long, lean fingers near the nostrils of the unconscious girl.

The effect appeared almost magical. A tinge of color instantly dispelled her ghastly paleness. She

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caught her breath with a gasp and a convulsive heave, as if some potent stimulant had suddenly filled her lungs, and Doctor Devoll quickly drew away the sponge and replaced it in his case, hastily closing it.

He scarcely had done so when, with a low moan, the girl opened her eyes and stared around, then at her observers, with the mute wonderment of one awakening amid strange surroundings and in view of unfamiliar faces. They seemed to alarm and further stimulate her, for she started up, gasping amazedly:

"Where—where am I? Who are you? What has happened?"

"Don't be alarmed, my girl." Doctor Devoll's thin face took on an assuring smile. "You are in no danger. You are in the casualty ward of the Osgood Hospital."

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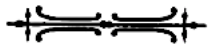
CHAPTER VI.
DOCTOR DEVOLL.

Patrolman Donovan drew a little nearer to the cot, that nothing said or done should escape him. The orderly had departed, and the announcement by the physician seemed to surprise and further mystify the reviving girl.

"A hospital—in a hospital?" she repeated perplexedly.

"Yes, you were brought here by this policeman, who found you on a seat in the hospital grounds," Doctor Devoll informed her. "You appeared to have fainted or to have been drugged."

"I cannot believe that I fainted," said the girl. "I don't understand it. It seems to me as



if I had just awakened from a deep sleep." She gazed around, still dazed and deeply puzzled; then asked abruptly: "What time is it?"

"It is after midnight, nearly one o'clock."

"One o'clock! Oh, I must go home! I must go home!"

She started up from the cot, and stood beside it. She appeared to have regained her strength. Her color had returned, her eyes were normal, though expressive of mingled uncertainty and dread.

"Do you feel quite well again?" Doctor Devoll asked, with sharper scrutiny. "Are you able to go home?"

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"Yes, yes, perfectly able. I must go home; I must go at once."

"Before leaving you must give me a few particulars about yourself," interposed the physician. "Where were you when you were overcome? Tell me what you last remember."

"I am not sure," she replied, with a manifest effort to comply. "I went to the Alhambra, a moving-picture theater. I had come out and was walking along Main Street when I——"

She stopped short, glancing apprehensively at the policeman. A deep flush suddenly mantled her cheeks. She hesitated, obviously embarrassed and somewhat frightened, and Doctor Devoll asked somewhat sharply:

"Why did you stop? What were you about to say?"

"I don't know—nothing more, sir, I think," she faltered. "I have told you all I know—all I can remember."

Donovan suspected that she was lying, but he did not venture to interfere, and Doctor Devoll said quite sternly:

"Don't try to conceal anything, my girl. What happened to you in Main Street? Can't you remember?"

"Only that I was there, sir; nothing more," she insisted. "I was alone and on my way home when suddenly everything became a blank. I don't know what followed, what I

did, or where I went. I remember nothing more until I awoke in this place and saw you bending over me. I am telling the truth, sir, and——"

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"Oh, I don't question your honesty, my girl," Doctor Devoll interposed less austerely. "What is your name?"

"Mabel Smith, sir," she admitted, after a moment.

"Where do you live?"

"I board at No. 81 Flint Street with Mrs. Morton, a widow. I must go home. She will be very anxious about me and may—did I have anything when I was brought in here? I mean my purse." She digressed abruptly; then stopped again, with a somewhat guilty expression in her troubled eyes.

There was a small table near the foot of the cot, on which the nurse had placed the girl's hat and a small, knit purse. The physician glanced at them, replying:

"Here is your purse, Miss Smith. Was there anything else?"

"I—I think I had a small leather bag," she replied.

"That appears to be missing."

"I'm not sure," she quickly added. "I don't know positively that I had it with me. If I did, sir, I suppose I must have dropped it."

Of the three men who had brought her in from the seat on which Donovan had found her, Sergeant Brady was the only one who had seen the small leather bag, which he had picked up from the ground and placed on the litter. But Sergeant Brady then was absent with the attendant, and no further search was made for the missing bag, for the girl said indifferently:

"It don't matter, sir. I may not have had it. May I go home? I really must. You have no right to detain me here."

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Donovan did not hear what then passed between Doctor Devoll and his mysteriously afflicted patient. The ward door had been opened, and Sergeant Brady beckoned to the

policeman and drew him into the corridor, closing the door.

“Well, what has she said for herself, Jim?” he inquired, gazing grimly at the policeman.

“Faith, it’s the same old story, sergeant,” Donovan replied significantly. “She can’t tell what happened to her. She don’t know enough to last her overnight.”

“Humph!” Brady grunted. “I suspected as much.”

“She seems to be on the level, though.”

“Level be hanged!” Brady spoke with a derisive snarl. “None of them was on the level, Jim, or we would have been able to trace them and find some solution of the mystery. Not one of them could be found after she left the hospital.”

“That’s true, sergeant. Sure, it does seem a bit strange.”

“I got Chief Gleason on the phone by calling up his house. He had gone home from headquarters. I reported the case to him, as

he directed, and—say nothing about this, mind you."

"Not a word, sergeant."

"It's not known by many that the big dick is in town, and he don't want it known at present," Brady impressively explained. "Nicholas Carter is at the Wilton House under the name of Blaisdell."

"Faith, is that so?" Donovan's face lighted. "Sure, he can dig out the truth, sergeant, if any man can."

"Gleason said he would telephone to him at once and send him here to size up the case," Brady added. "He ought to show up within twenty minutes. You

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return to your beat. I'll stay here and detain the girl until Carter comes."

"All right, sergeant."

"You can leave by that door through which we came in. Go ahead. We'll not want more of you to-night."

Donovan touched his helmet and hurried away.

Sergeant Brady gazed after him for a moment; then turned and entered the wardroom, when an ominous frown instantly settled on his face.

Miss Mabel Smith had departed.

There remained only the nurse, Agnes, then engaged in putting the narrow cot in order. Brady strode toward her, asking roughly:

“Where’s that girl? Not gone, has she?”

“Yes, sir. She went with Doctor Devoll, sir, through the corridor leading to the front office,” said the nurse, pointing to a door at the opposite end of the wardroom.

“When? How long ago?” Brady demanded.

“Not more than two or three minutes. You might overtake them, sir, if you hurry. I’ll show you the way.”

“Do so. I want the girl detained here.”

The nurse hurriedly led the way, Brady striding after her. They passed through a

long corridor leading to the main part of the building and entered a brightly lighted office fronting on Hamilton Square.

Doctor Devoll was alone there, closing a roll-top desk.

“Has that girl gone, doctor?” Brady demanded the moment he entered.

The physician’s brows fell slightly, and his cold

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blue eyes took on a sharper glint. He appeared to resent the officer’s brusqueness. He no further betrayed it, however, and said, with characteristic blandness:

“She has, sergeant. Why do you ask?”

“Because I wanted to detain her.”

“Detain her? For what?” The physician gazed more intently.

“For what!” Brady echoed him derisively. “It strikes me, Doctor Devoll, that this business has gone far enough. This is the fourth girl brought here in the same

condition, under the same mysterious circumstances, and allowed to depart before a thorough investigation was made. Not hide nor hair of them could afterward be found. She should have been kept here until we could——"

"Pardon me, sergeant," Doctor Devoll checked him with a gesture, "you overlook one fact."

"One fact?"

"This is a hospital, not a police station. I am a physician, not a detective. My duty is to care for a patient, if necessary, but not to hold one in custody after one has recovered. I have no right to do that. The young lady insisted upon going home, and I had no proper course but to let her go."

"All right, doctor, if you look at it in that way," said Brady, still frowning darkly.

"There is no other way for me to look at it," Doctor Devoll said suavely. "As a matter of fact, however, you can easily find and question the girl. I learned her name and

address, which I neglected doing in the previous cases."

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"Ah, that's better!" Brady declared. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Mabel Smith. She boards at No. 81 Flint Street."

"Good enough! The matter now can rest until to-morrow," said Brady. "May I use your telephone? I wish to say a word to Mr. Blaisdell, at the Wilton House."

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CHAPTER VII.
GROUNDS FOR SUSPICION.

Sergeant Brady got in communication with Nicholas Carter that night just in time to prevent him from visiting the hospital, following the telephone talk he had with Chief Gleason, after the latter had been notified of this fourth mysterious case.

Carter had not quite finished his breakfast the following morning, however, at which

he was seated with Chick and Patsy in a private dining room of the Wilton House, when their waiter brought in a sealed missive, which the detective opened and read. It consisted of only two lines:

"I want to see you. I am waiting in the hotel parlor.

"Brady."

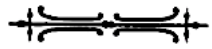
The detective thrust the note into his pocket and waved the waiter from the room.

"It's from Sergeant Brady," he then said to his companions. "He is up in the parlor. There must be something doing, or he would not have called so early. I'll drink my coffee and take him up to our suite. You can join us there."

"It probably relates to that girl," said Chick.

"Very likely. He may want my advice or assistance."

"You haven't forgotten the autopsy this morning, chief, in that Todd case, have you?" Patsy reminded him inquiringly. "You said you wanted to be there."



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"No, I've not forgotten it, Patsy," said his chief, rising. "I'll be there all right, after learning what Brady has on his mind."

"We'll be with you again in five minutes," Chick remarked, as the detective was leaving.

Carter found Brady at the parlor door, and he at once conducted him to his suite on the floor above, where he produced a box of cigars and invited him to be seated.

"I slipped in through the side door and sent my note by your waiter, after learning that you were at breakfast," Brady informed him while lighting his cigar. "If it were known that a police sergeant was calling upon you, your identity might be suspected."

"Possibly," Carter admitted. "You did the right thing, Brady, at all events. What's on your mind?"

"Gleason sent me. It's about that girl. I could not telephone any of the particulars to you last night, for Doctor Devoll was in the office and heard all I was saying. He might

have suspected that I was talking with a detective.

"So I merely told you that the girl had gone and that it would be useless for you to follow the suggestion made you. I referred, of course, to Chief Gleason's communication."

"I understood you."

"This morning, however, I have made other discoveries," Brady added. "They shed still a worse light on the case."

"Did the circumstances last night differ materially from those of the three other cases about which Gleason informed me?" the detective inquired.

"No, they were almost identical."

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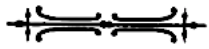
"You need not state them, then. What more have you discovered?"

Brady told him what Donovan had seen and heard, nevertheless, and he then added, replying:



“Doctor Devoll asked the girl for her name and address in this case. She said it was Mabel Smith and that she boarded at No. 81 Flint Street. I have been there this morning. The house is occupied by a man with whom I am well acquainted, and who is entirely reliable. He knows no girl named Mabel Smith. She gave Doctor Devoll a fictitious name.”

“I see,” Carter nodded. “That is somewhat significant.”

“I also learned from Donovan, who was present when the girl revived, that she claimed to have had a small leather bag. I happen to know that she had, for I picked it up from the ground near the seat on which she was found. I placed it on the litter on which she was taken into the hospital, and I know it was there when she was taken into the ward.”

“Couldn’t it be found?”

“No. Since learning that she gave a false name, and, thinking the bag might contain

something that would reveal her identity, I have been to the hospital in search of it."

"Whom did you see or question?"

"The night nurse and the orderly. Both appear to be trustworthy. They deny having seen the bag. The attendant could not have taken it, for he went with me to the operating room and did not return. It's absurd, of course, to suppose Doctor Devoll took it, and there remains only the girl herself."

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"Did she have any opportunity to get possession of it without being seen?" Carter inquired.

"I asked about that, and was told that she was not seen to find it," said Brady. "It is barely possible that she did, nevertheless, and that it contained something which she did not wish Doctor Devoll to see."

"Very possibly," the detective allowed.

"Otherwise, she would have admitted having found it."

“That’s reasonable, sergeant.”

“That’s how I size it up,” Brady added. “It seems to me the only plausible explanation. What I can’t fathom, however, is why these girls are repeatedly found unconscious in the hospital grounds, and why this last one lied in order to hide her identity. Why were they all so anxious to get away and avoid publicity?”

Nicholas Carter did not express his views. He did not care to indulge in vain speculations. As a matter of fact, moreover, he was nearly as puzzled as the police sergeant by the quite extraordinary circumstances. He looked up from a figure in the Wilton carpet, at which he had been thoughtfully gazing, and asked:

“Have any charges been made at headquarters or a complaint of any kind that might even indirectly relate to any of these cases?”

“No, nothing of the kind,” said Brady confidently. “I’m dead sure of that.”

“Have the police tried in each case to trace and identify the girl?”

“Yes, indeed, for all they were worth.”

“But with no success at all?”

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“None whatever. If we could hit upon any motive for such a job, or see anything to have been gained by it, we might get on the track of the crooks. For the fact that all the girls told the same story, and plainly enough had been drugged or rendered insensible by some mysterious means, shows that there must have been trickery of some kind.”

“I agree with you, Brady, in that respect.”

“Strange to say, nevertheless, the victims appeared anxious only to leave the hospital as quickly as possible and to bury themselves in obscurity.”

“Have the newspapers reported the previous cases?”

“Yes, indeed, in display type.”

“They must have been read by these girls, then, and there must be some serious reason

for their reticence," said Nick. "Very evidently, Brady, there is something under the surface, something quite out of the ordinary. Gleason wants me to look into this last case?"

"That's just what he wants, Carter."

"Who is the chief director or head physician of the Osgood Hospital?"

"Doctor Devoll."

"He who looked after the girl last night, eh?"

"Yes. He ranks high among the local physicians. He's all right, too, I guess."

"No doubt," the detective agreed. "Well, Brady. I'll look into the case. I am to see Chief Gleason during this morning, and I then will have a talk with him about it. I infer that you have nothing more to tell me."

"No, nothing," said Brady, rising to go. "You have got all that I can hand you."

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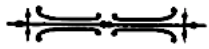
Carter sat smoking and frowning at the carpet for several moments after the sergeant



had departed. The several cases were so unusual, so exceedingly inexplicable, that they interested him. Had there been only one such case, only one girl found in the hospital grounds, he would have considered it hardly worthy of his serious attention; but four in such close proximity to each other, and so much alike, plainly proved that they were victims of some person or persons.

His reflections were ended by the entrance of Chick and Patsy only two or three minutes after Brady departed, and he briefly told them what the sergeant stated, both already being informed of the other circumstances.

"Gee whiz!" said Patsy, after hearing him attentively. "It sure is a curious puzzle, chief. What do you make of it, and how are you going to tackle it?"

"I don't make much of it, Patsy, at present," his chief frankly admitted. "There must be a very potent cause for the reticence of all four girls and for their obvious wish to remain in the background."

“Sure thing. That goes without saying.”

“It’s barely possible that they are in league with crooks who were responsible for what befell them, and that they do not dare to come forward and tell the truth.”

“Mebbe so, chief,” Patsy nodded.

“On the other hand, the whole business may be the work of some exceedingly keen and clever rascal who, alone and with some ulterior object in view, has been experimenting with these girls and paving the way to a much more knavish project,” the detective added.

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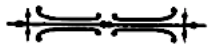
“If that is correct, it’s a hundred to one that he is the unknown crook who committed the mysterious robberies mentioned by Gleason, and whom he is so anxious to round up.”

“By Jove, there may be something in that!” Chick said quickly. “It appears to be the most probable explanation.”

“I think so, too.”



“But what are your plans, chief?” asked Patsy earnestly. “How are we to pick up a trail worth following?”

“By finding that girl who said her name was Mabel Smith,” the chief replied pointedly. “That must be done, to begin with, and then we’ll go a step further.”

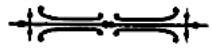
“But how can we trace her?”

“That’s up to you, Chick.”

“Up to me, eh?”

“It’s the task you must tackle this morning,” said Carter. “We have a great deal to accomplish to-day, and each must do his part. I wish to follow up the Todd case, with Patsy to aid me. You had better go to the hospital, Chick, and get after that girl. I have no great faith in Brady’s discernment and acumen. You could discover more in a minute, Chick, than he would learn in a month of Sundays.”

“Oh, I’ll take it on, chief,” Chick said agreeably. “I may perhaps pick up a thread. I’ll report when we meet for lunch.”



"In the meantime, Patsy, in anticipation of what I expect an autopsy to reveal, I want you to visit the office of Daly & Page, stock brokers, and see what you quietly can learn about Gaston Todd," the detective

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directed. "You are not known in Madison, and your motive will not be suspected. You may cover that, if you like, by pretending to be a newspaper reporter."

"Enough said," replied Patsy. "I've got you, chief."

"Not entirely," Nick rejoined. "Find out at just what time Todd left the office yesterday, and whether it was his customary time of going out in the middle of the day. If not, make it a point to learn, if possible, why he went out at an unusual time. He may have received a letter, or a telephone call, or a communication by messenger."

"I understand," said Patsy. "Leave it to me."

"In other words," said Carter, "I want to learn why Todd went to the Waldmere Chambers about noon, and why he was

waiting in the corridor, where Frank Paulding saw him."

"I'll find out, chief, if possible."

"It may be necessary to take other steps later in order to hit the right trail," Carter said in conclusion. "I will decide about that after learning what the autopsy reveals. I'll see the coroner and medical examiner this morning."

"We may as well be off, then, and get in our work," said Chick.

"The sooner the better," the detective declared, glancing at his watch. "It is now nine o'clock. We'll meet here again at one."

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CHAPTER VIII.

THE YELLOW COUPON.

It was half past nine when Chick sauntered across Hamilton Square and sized up the buildings and grounds of the Osgood Hospital. He had learned from his chief the general lay of the land, so to speak, and

continued around the extensive park and grounds, seeking the rear gate through which Mabel Smith, so called, had either entered or been carried into the place.

He was not long in finding the gate, and he then discovered a gardener at work near by with a lawn mower. Entering with an air of cursory interest only, he approached him and inquired:

"Is there any objection to my looking around a bit?"

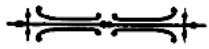
"No, sir, I reckon not," said the laborer.

"I'll not disturb anything."

"Go ahead, sir. Go as far as you like."

Chick sauntered up the gravel walk, and presently discovered the iron seat on which the girl had been found. He walked over to it across the lawn and sat down, in seeming enjoyment of the shade tree overhanging it, but in reality to make a careful inspection of the surrounding ground.

He could discover in the greensward at first only the marks left by the feet of the two



policemen, whose heavy and lingering tread had obliterated any other imprints that might have been there when they arrived

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upon the spot. As he was about to go, however, he caught sight of a small piece of a yellow card half hidden in the grass back of the seat. He leaned over and picked it up.

It was part of a theater ticket, the coupon for a seat, and it was dated for the previous evening.

"The Alhambra," Chick read. "By Jove, that's the theater from which the girl said she had come. She evidently did not lie from start to finish. H'm! This may help."

He had detected a faint aroma from the coupon, and he held it nearer to his nostrils.

"Violet perfumery, but of an inferior quality," he said to himself. "That indicates that she's a girl of only moderate means, who cannot afford an expensive extract. She carried the ticket in a bag with her handkerchief, which was scented. This may

start me on the right scent, too, and I'll proceed to follow it up."

Placing the coupon in his notebook, he sauntered back across the lawn and passed out through the gate. He then saw that there was a narrow court beyond a row of dwellings on the opposite side of the street, which evidently was an outlet into the streets beyond.

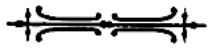
Crossing over, he walked in that direction, and as he was passing the third house from the court he saw a polished brass plate on the vestibule door:

"Gordon Barclay. Artist."

Chick stopped short and gazed up at the door.

"By Jove, this must be Don Barclay," he muttered. "It's not likely that there are two artists by that name. I've not seen him for years. I'll take a chance that I'm right and will meet an old friend."

He mounted the steps and rang the bell. A butler



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admitted him and vanished with his card on a silver tray. Presently, with hurried steps that evinced a very genuine eagerness, a well-built, handsome man in a velvet jacket rushed into the room, with eyes and cheeks aglow and his hands extended in cordial greeting.

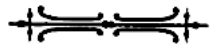
"Holy smoke, Chick Carter! The one and only Chick himself!" he shouted. "Gracious, but I'm glad to see you! How the dickens came you here? You're not after me, are you?"

Chick laughed, and returned the speaker's cordial greeting.

"No, indeed, Don, nothing like that," he replied. "I'm in Madison on other business. I was passing this house only by chance, and I saw your door plate."

"Thank Heaven, you didn't overlook it!"

"And it occurred to me that we have not met for three years——"



"Four, you rascal!" Barclay cut in boisterously. "It was on a boxing night at the Hudson Athletic Club. I remember it perfectly."

"That's right, Don."

"Sure, Chick, it's right. By Jove, you're a sight for sore eyes! Come to the dining room and we'll fire a ball. Then I'll take you up to my studio and show you where I'm winning fame and fortune by slinging paint. That's on the top floor. We'll have a smoke and a good old-fashioned chat. By gracious, I'm glad to see you!"

There was no doubting it. It stuck out all over the genial, vivacious artist, and for nearly an hour Chick complied with his wishes and responded to his running fire of questions. Then, during a lull in their

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conversation, he turned it upon the matter more seriously engaging him.

"Now, Don, a word about my mission in Madison," said he, dropping the end of his

cigar on a tray. “I know you may be trusted to say nothing about it.”

“Not a word, Chick,” Barclay assured him. “Come on with it.”

“You read the newspapers, I suppose.”

“Only the headlines,” laughed the artist. “The details give me a confounded headache.”

“You may not know about it, then,” said Chick. “I’m here to help clear up quite a sensational mystery in this immediate locality.”

“Thunder! You don’t say so. Why, I thought the old fogies who dwell in this locality were too slow and sedate to get into anything more sensational than the death column.”

“I will confide the case to you.”

He did so briefly, merely stating the main features of the previous night, and a look of mingled surprise and amusement then appeared in the artist’s eyes.

“Well, by gracious, that’s jolly funny!” he declared, drawing up in his chair.

“Funny! What do you mean?” Chick inquired.

“Why, it’s like this,” Barclay proceeded to explain. “I use this top floor for my studio, where I get the best light. I was at work here quite late last night. It must have been nearly midnight. Here, come this way. Come to the window.”

Chick arose and accompanied him to a broad window overlooking most of the square, including the hospital building and grounds. Only a small part

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of the grounds was hidden from view by the building itself.

“Last night, just after I finished my work, I looked out here for a breath of fresh air,” Barclay resumed. “It was quite dark down below, but I caught sight of a motor cab, one of the noiseless type that is run by electricity, for it moved without a sound. I followed it with my eyes, having nothing

better to do, and I saw it stop at a gate leading into the hospital grounds."

"That rear gate beyond the west wing?"

"Yes, the same." Barclay turned and nodded. "Do you suppose it figured in the case you mentioned?"

"I would not be surprised," Chick said a bit grimly. "Continue. What more did you see?"

"Nothing very definite," Barclay said. "I was not watching the cab suspiciously or with a very lively interest, though it struck me as being rather singular that it stopped at that gate, instead of in front of the hospital, or at a house on this side of the street, if the occupants were going there."

"Did you see any one enter the cab or leave it?"

"I did not. Notice that the trees obstruct the view somewhat, and the lamps are all on this side. I am sure, however, that no one crossed the street," Barclay quickly added. "I would have seen him in that case. Obviously, therefore, if any one left the cab, he must have gone into the hospital grounds."

"That is what I suspect," said Chick. "Which way did the cab go when departing?"

"Straight on and around the square. I know it did not return for ten minutes at least, if at all, for I stood here smoking as long as that."

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"You saw no one, then, nor heard anything?"

"No, neither."

"From which direction did the cab come?"

"Through the court at the end of this block," said Barclay, pointing. "It leads out into Belmont Street."

"You think it was an electric cab?"

"I'm almost sure of that."

"How long did it remain at the gate?"

"Not more than a couple of minutes," said Barclay. "Do you really think it figures in your affair?"

"As a matter of fact, Don, I think there is hardly any doubt of it," Chick said seriously. "In a way, however, it serves only to increase the mystery."

"I don't quite see your point."

"My point is this," Chick explained. "Why did the person, or persons, responsible for this curious affair go to the trouble to bring the victim, if she was a victim, and place her on a seat in the hospital grounds? She could have been left in many places with much less danger of detection. In the court itself or a dark doorway. It surely is a singular mystery."

Barclay puckered his brows thoughtfully, but he could suggest no theory for the circumstances. Moreover, he could not give the detective any additional information.

Declining an invitation to remain to dinner, Chick remained only to warn the artist to say nothing about the affair, and he then bade him farewell and departed. He did not retrace his steps. Instead, he sauntered through the court mentioned, which was only wide enough for a single vehicle, and he presently found himself in Belmont Street, a quiet residential

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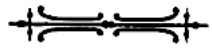

avenue, with a traffic-filled thoroughfare to be seen in the distance.

"By Jove, it looks very much as if I am hitting the right trail," Chick said to himself, now shaping a course toward the business section. "If the girl left the Alhambra when the show ended, it then must have been about eleven o'clock, and if she lost consciousness while walking homeward through Main Street, it's a safe gamble that she did not go far in her abnormal condition. She may have been picked up by the cab, therefore, and brought this way and through the court just as Barclay was gazing from his window. It would have taken only a couple of minutes to place the girl on the seat and move on, as he stated, which would show plainly that one or more men had a hand in the job. But what was the object? That's the question. By Jove, I'll head for the Alhambra and see what I can learn."

He arrived at the moving-picture house ten minutes later. He found the manager, Mr. Hewitt, in the ticket office with one of his sellers. Addressing him through the lattice

window, at the same time tendering the yellow coupon, he inquired:

“Do you know, or have you any way of learning, who occupied this seat in your theater last evening?”

Hewitt gazed at him a bit sharply through his glasses; then shook his head and tossed the coupon aside, saying indifferently:

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Are you the manager?”

“Yes.”

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Chick did not fancy being treated in that way. He pressed a little nearer to the window, and said, with sinister intonation:

“You take a tip from me, Mr. Manager, and have another think. Make it a more serious one this time.”

“What do you mean by that?” frowned Hewitt.

“Just what I say,” Chick replied, turning the lap of his vest and displaying his detective’s badge.

Hewitt started perceptibly, and flushed deeply.

“Oh, that’s different; very different,” he said in tones of hasty apology. “I did not suppose it was a matter of any importance.”

“I don’t waste my time or encroach upon that of others with unimportant matters,” Chick replied coldly. “Have a look at the coupon now, and give me the information I want, if possible. Can you tell who occupied the seat?”

“Well, really, sir, I hardly think so,” Hewitt now said regretfully. “In a theater of this size——”

“Stop a moment, sir,” interrupted his assistant, who was also inspecting the coupon. “This was torn from a ticket sold by telephone and held until called for. Here is a mark of my indelible pencil on the back of it.”

“Do you write the patron’s name on the back of a ticket when it is to be held till called for?” asked Chick.

“Yes, certainly. But only the tail of the last letter happened to fall on the coupon,” said the assistant. “It contains no part of the name. See for yourself.”

“Very true,” Chick admitted. “But what has become of that part of the ticket taken at the door?”

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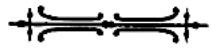
“The stubs?”

“If that’s what you call them. Have they been destroyed? No two coupons are torn off exactly alike. We might find the ticket that this coupon perfectly matches, as well as these pencil lines, that would give us the name of the purchaser.”

“By Jove, sir, that’s as true as gospel!” Hewitt declared. “No, the stubs have not been destroyed. I threw them into my wastebasket last evening after making up the house. They still are there.”

“Let’s have a look at them.”



"Certainly, sir, and I'll assist you," Hewitt readily assented. "Open the door, Jim, for the gentleman to enter. Walk into my private office, Mr.— —"

"Chickering," said Chick dryly.

"We'll very soon examine them, Mr. Chickering," Hewitt added, pulling a wastebasket from under his desk. "Take a seat. We need to examine only the yellow stubs and those having a name on them, and that may be quickly done."

It was not in Chick's nature to nurse resentment, and he now met the much more gracious manager halfway. Less than fifty of the stubs had been inspected and compared with the coupon when the desired one was found. There could be no mistaking it, and on the back of it was written the name: "Nellie Fielding."

Hewitt called in his assistant and questioned him, showing him the ticket.

"That's your writing, Jim," said he. "Do you remember selling the woman the ticket, or — —"

“Remember—sure thing,” interrupted the other.

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“She comes here every week. I know her well by sight and where she works.”

“Very good,” said Chick, suppressing his elation. “Where is she employed?”

“She’s a waitress in Boyden’s restaurant, in Middle Street. You’ll find her there at any hour of the day.”

“Thank you,” Chick bowed, with a glance from one to the other. “I’m obliged to both of you.”

He lingered only to warn them not to communicate with the girl; then he shook hands with both and hurried from the theater.

“Now, by Jove, there’ll be something doing,” he said to himself, much as if he had thus far been idle. “I’ll mighty soon find out why the milk is in the coconut.”

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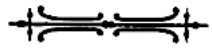
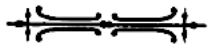


CHAPTER IX.
SUSPICIONS VERIFIED.

Nicholas Carter and his assistants were never slow in beginning to weave a net in which to catch a culprit when the evidence and circumstances in a case convinced them that a crime had been committed.

Patsy Garvan, while Chick was engaged as described, was nearly as successful as the latter in picking up the first strands with which the net might be formed. Hastening to the brokerage office of Daly & Page, he introduced himself to the latter, the former then having gone to the local stock exchange, and requested a few facts concerning the history and character of Mr. Gaston Todd, whose very sudden death had greatly shocked his many friends in Madison.

"He was a fine fellow," Page glibly informed him. "Genial, honest, and capable, devoted to our interests, and always at his desk in business hours. That's pretty good, isn't it? That's all we require of a man."



"That would seem to fill the bill, sir," Patsy observed a bit dryly.

"It does," said the broker. "And what such a man does out of business hours, of what his habits and deportment consist, are of little importance to us. Todd served us faithfully for ten years. We shall miss him. We shall, indeed!"

"He died very suddenly," said Patsy. "Had you any idea that he was afflicted with any ailment?"

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"No, not the slightest. His death came like a bolt from the blue."

"Was he regular in his habits?"

"Very."

"I understand that he left here about twelve o'clock. Did he usually go out at that time?"

"Well, no, he did not." Page gazed more sharply at his questioner. "He usually lunched at one o'clock."

"He may have had some mission to attend to for the firm, or——"

“No, nothing of that kind. He was our cashier, and his duty kept him here. You raise a point, young man, that has not occurred to me. By the way, Archie,” Page called to a clerk who had served in Todd’s place when the latter was absent, “come here a moment. Do you know why Todd went out an hour earlier than usual yesterday?”

“Well, I’m not sure, sir,” replied the clerk. “I think it was because of a telephone message.”

“Do you know from whom?”

“No, sir. I know only that he was called to the telephone just before noon. When he returned he asked me to take his place in the cage, saying that he was going out for a few minutes. That’s all I know about it.”

That was all of any importance that Patsy was able to learn, but it was sufficient to send him posthaste to the office of the telephone exchange. There he stated his mission to the manager, who conducted him into a room where three girl operators were seated at a large switchboard.

“Look at your record sheets for yesterday,” said the manager, addressing them. “Which of you made

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a connection for Daly & Page, 442 West, just before twelve o’clock?”

One of the girls replied in a few minutes, after inspecting a large sheet of paper taken from a drawer:

“I did, sir, and I now remember it distinctly,” she said. “It was the last I made before going to lunch.”

“Is there any way of learning who made the call?” Patsy inquired.

“Only by ringing up Daly & Page and asking them,” said the manager.

“They do not know,” said Patsy. “The call was not for the firm.”

“It was for a man named Todd,” put in the operator.

“How did you learn that?”

"I heard a few words that were said before I removed my receiver," explained the girl. "The man who rang up the number said he wanted to talk with Mr. Todd, and half a minute later I heard him ask: 'Is that you, Todd?'"

"Are you sure it was a man's voice?"

"Yes, positively."

"Did you hear him say anything more?"

"I heard Todd reply in the affirmative. The other then said, as near as I can remember, that he was Todd's running mate who was talking, and that Todd must go at once to the Waldmere Chambers and wait in the second-floor corridor until the speaker could join him."

"That was all?"

"Yes, sir. I heard the last while I was removing the receiver. It is only by chance that I remember it. His calling himself Todd's running mate, however,

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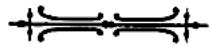
sounded so singular to me that I listened for a moment longer. That is all I can tell you."

Patsy thanked her, also the manager, and departed.

It then was about the time when Nick Carter entered the Madison mortuary, to which all that remained of Gaston Todd had been taken, and where the autopsy was to be performed. It was finished, in fact, or all that then could be done, when Nick entered, and he found only Coroner Kane and Doctor Marvin, the district medical examiner, in the superintendent's office. He scarce had arrived there, however, when Chief Gleason followed him in from the street.

Nick already had introduced himself to the others, with whom an appointment for him had been made by the chief, and, after a few conventional preliminaries, he brought up the business engaging them.

"Well, what's the verdict, Doctor Marvin?" he inquired. "You say you have made a thorough examination of the body."



"Not quite," corrected the physician, glancing at a leather bag on the floor. "There are parts of the body of which I wish to make a microscopic examination and subject to chemical analysis. I do say, however, that you should have been a physician, Mr. Carter, despite the fact that you would be badly missed in your present vocation."

"You mean, I infer, that you wonder why I so quickly suspected that Todd did not die from natural causes," said the detective.

"Exactly. On what do you base your suspicion?"

"On several facts, doctor, which are hardly worthy of mention," Nick said indifferently. "The surrounding

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circumstances, Todd's outward indications of good health, a lingering expression denoting mingled fright and horror, evinced also by an unusual dilation of his pupils—these, together with a singular abnormal appearance of the skin near the lips and nostrils. But the result of your own

examination is much more material," he abruptly digressed. "What is your opinion?"

"The same as your own," said Doctor Marvin more gravely.

"You found——"

"That there was absolutely no organic disease. His vital organs were apparently in a perfectly healthy condition. I can discover no natural cause for Todd's sudden death."

"Did you notice the singular condition I have mentioned?" Nick inquired.

"I did," said the physician. "I detect it, or a somewhat similar condition, in the tissues of the lungs. They have a curious, withered or cauterized appearance."

"Have you any opinion as to the cause?"

"I would say it was caused by inhaling some very powerful corrosive gas, possibly of a deadly nature, though from what it was derived or how administered I cannot imagine, even if I am right. I am going to submit them to tests, however, also the

blood, that may enable me to form a more definite opinion and solve the problem."

"Do you think there is any problem, doctor, or any doubt, to put it more properly, that Gaston Todd died an unnatural death?"

"No, not the slightest, Mr. Carter."

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"Do you think it the result of a crime?"

"Well, I think the circumstances warrant very serious suspicions," Doctor Marvin said gravely.

"So do I," Nick declared. "As a matter of fact, gentlemen, I feel reasonably sure that Gaston Todd was, with some strange and atrocious means, most foully murdered."

"We agree with you," Coroner Kane now asserted. "There are other circumstances which warrant that suspicion."

"You mean?"

"They involve a young man known to have had feelings of bitter enmity for Todd, with whom he had an angry altercation night before last and who was seen leaving the

Waldmere Chambers only a minute or two before Todd was found dead on the corridor floor."

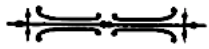
"Do you refer to Frank Paulding?" the detective inquired.

"Yes. How did you learn about him, Mr. Carter?" inquired the coroner, with a look of surprise.

"Chief Gleason spoke of him to me and mentioned their unfriendly relations," Nick explained, but he said nothing about his interview with Paulding. "He was seen leaving the Waldmere Chambers, you say?"

"Yes. We have found two witnesses and the time is definitely fixed. Though they were not seen to meet, we are reasonably sure that they did, and that Paulding hurried out of the building and up the street immediately afterward."

"All that does appear suspicious," Nick agreed, not without an object. "Have you questioned Paulding?" he added, turning to Chief Gleason.



"No, not yet," replied the latter. "I have followed

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your advice and waited until after the autopsy. I have had Paulding under espionage since last evening."

"A wise precaution, chief."

"What do you now advise?" Gleason added. "It strikes me— —"

"If the circumstances are incriminating, as you say," Nick interrupted, "I think it will be wise to arrest Paulding and hold him until after Doctor Marvin's further investigations. If we can prove positively that Todd was murdered, we may build up a strong case against the lawyer and possibly force a confession from him."

"I already have decided on that step, Mr. Carter," said the coroner. "See to it, Gleason. Have Paulding arrested as soon as possible, chief, and held on suspicion."

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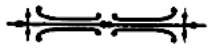


CHAPTER X.
THE DEEPER MYSTERY.

Nick Carter returned to the Wilton House at one o'clock. He found Chick and Patsy waiting for him, both of whom quickly told him what they had learned that morning, and then heard his own brief report of the inquest.

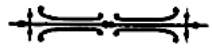
"By Jove, you were right!" Chick then said seriously. "It now is a cinch that Todd was murdered."

"I felt reasonably sure of it from the first," the detective replied.

"But who killed him?" put in Patsy. "That's the question. You say you are sure, chief, that Paulding did not do it."

"Yes, absolutely."

"What's your game, then? Why did you frame up a deal with him, telling him he might not be suspected and afterward advise having him arrested?"



"Superficially, Patsy, that does appear quite inconsistent," said Nick, smiling. "In reality, however, I called on Paulding only to get his measure and convince myself of his innocence. I want him arrested, nevertheless, in order that Todd's assassin, as to whose identity and motive we are entirely in the dark, may think the police are sure they have the right man. That will relieve him of fears that otherwise would put him on his guard. We then can get in our work with much less difficulty."

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"There is something in that, chief, all right," Patsy quickly allowed.

"It's up to us to find the right man, however, and now a word about your report," Nick added. "From what little the telephone girl heard, it is very evident that Todd was called to the Waldmere Chambers and directed to wait in the corridor either by the man who killed him or by a man in league with or acting under the instructions of the assassin. In other words, Todd was lured there only to be murdered."

"Plainly enough," Chick agreed. "We can safely bank on that."

"We know, too, that Paulding then was in the building to confer with a client," Carter continued. "Being convinced of his innocence, I know it was not he who telephoned to Todd."

"Surely not."

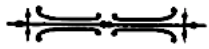
"The fact that he was there, however, is very significant."

"Of what, chief?" questioned Patsy.

"He may have been seen by some person anxious to kill Todd and who, knowing their unfriendly relations, and that Paulding would presently leave, took advantage of the situation to lure Todd there, taking a chance that he could kill him unobserved by others immediately after Paulding departed, believing that the latter then would be suspected."

"That's plausible," Chick nodded.

"And that's why Todd was directed to wait in the corridor," Carter pointed out. "The



assassin wanted him to be there when Paulding left the building. The fact that he was not seen by Paulding, however, and that he could confidently plan such a crime, as well as

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commit it, without being seen or heard, shows that he must have had several advantages. He may be a tenant in the building. It would not be easy or discreet for an outsider to have undertaken it."

"That's true, by Jove, and quite suggestive."

"Furthermore, he evidently knew that Todd would obey his instructions or his commands, which indicates that he may have had a hold on him of some kind. Otherwise, Todd might not have left his desk in business hours to keep the appointment."

"True again, chief."

"He referred to himself as Todd's running mate, moreover, if the telephone girl heard correctly," said Nick. "Plainly, then, they have been intimately related in some way, either in business or as friends, and Todd

naturally would not have apprehended anything like assassination."

"Surely not, chief," said Patsy.

"We next must learn, therefore, with whom Todd was specially friendly, and whom he has been visiting in the Waldmere Chambers."

"That's the stuff, chief, for fair."

"You set about it this afternoon, Patsy," Carter directed. "Now, Chick, concerning Nellie Fielding. You have not seen her?"

"Not yet," said Chick. "It was nearly one o'clock when I left the Alhambra, and I decided to report to you and have a bite to eat before seeking the girl. I warned Hewitt and his ticket seller not to communicate with her."

"See her after lunch, then, and be governed by what she says and how she appears," Carter directed. "It

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may be wise to shadow her, in case she is playing a deeper game than appears on the

surface. If alarmed by your inquiries, she may attempt to warn others."

"Possibly. I'll keep an eye on her, chief, at all events."

"There may be a connection between the several cases, Todd's murder and the mystery involving these four girls," Carter added. "I shall see Doctor Devoll this afternoon. I want to know just what he thinks about them, and the strange condition in which they were found."

It was three o'clock when Chick approached Boyden's restaurant in Middle Street. A man of middle age was standing in the doorway, whose interest in the appearance of one of the adjoining windows denoted that he was the proprietor. He walked out, and was to leave in a moment, when Chick, without having approached near enough to be seen from within, paused and asked:

"Are you Mr. Boyden?"

"I am," said the latter. "Were you looking for me?"

"I want to inquire about a girl in your employ. It is in connection with some legal investigations, but in which the girl figures only indirectly," Chick blandly explained. "Her name is Nellie Fielding."

"What do you wish to learn about her?" Boyden questioned.

"How long has she been working for you?"

"About a year."

"Is she married?"

"No, indeed. She is only nineteen, and is the only support of a crippled sister."

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"That speaks well for her," Chick remarked tentatively.

"Not more so than she deserves," Boyden quickly assured him. "Nellie is a very good girl, none better, sir, as far as that goes. She has no means beyond what she earns, but she is strictly honest and reliable."

"Her character and habits are good?"

"Yes, indeed, or she would not be in my employ."

"I want to talk with her for a few moments."

"Go ahead. You'll find her at the office counter. She acts as my cashier when I am out. I have an appointment, or I would go in and introduce you."

"Thank you, but that is not necessary," said Chick. "I want only a few words with her."

Boyden bowed and departed without replying, and Chick turned toward the restaurant door. The information he had received was all to the girl's credit. It denoted that evil and deception were entirely foreign to her nature. Chick knew that she had lied to Doctor Devoll, nevertheless, and he was determined to learn for what reason.

There were only a few scattered patrons in the restaurant at that hour, and he found Nellie Fielding at leisure, standing behind a small counter on which were a cash register and a cigar case. He approached and bought some cigars from her, at once favorably

impressed with her neat appearance and modest bearing.

"You are Miss Fielding, I believe," he remarked while paying her.

"Yes, sir," she replied, smiling at him over the cash register. "That is my name."

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"There is a little matter about which I wish to question you," said Chick. "I refer to what occurred last evening when you—there, don't be alarmed!" he quickly digressed. "There is nothing for you to fear, Miss Fielding, if you have done nothing wrong, and I feel quite sure that you have not."

She had turned very pale, with a frightened expression leaping up in her eyes. She shrank from him, trembling perceptibly, until his hasty assurance somewhat relieved her.

"No, no, I have done nothing wrong, sir," she protested, with quite pathetic fervor. "How did you know—how did you learn about it? I did only what I—oh, sir, I could

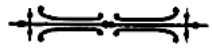
see nothing else to do! I—I wanted to avoid publicity."

"Compose yourself," Chick said quietly. "I can see quite plainly that you were more sinned against than sinner. You have nothing to fear from me, Miss Fielding, if you tell me the truth, and I think there will be no need for any publicity."

"Are you a policeman?" she asked tremulously.

"I am a detective," Chick admitted. "You must not mention it to others, however, or the fact that I have questioned you. There have been other cases very like your own, Miss Fielding, and I am quietly investigating them. You must tell me the truth, therefore, and I think I can safely assure you that it will be only to your advantage. Will you do so?"

"Yes, yes," she replied, much relieved by Chick's kindly voice and manner. "As a matter of fact, sir, I really have nothing to conceal. I am anxious only to avoid publicity."



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"That is why you gave Doctor Devoll a fictitious name?" Chick asked, smiling.

"Yes, yes," Nellie admitted, coloring deeply. "But I had one other reason also."

"What was that?"

"I will tell you just what occurred. You then will understand and perhaps will appreciate my feelings."

"I think so." Chick bowed. "Tell me frankly. I would be glad to befriend you in any way."

"It was like this, sir." The girl leaned nearer to him over the show case and spoke with lowered voice. "I had been alone to the Alhambra, and the show was an unusually long one. It was after eleven o'clock when it ended. I came out with the crowd and turned up Main Street to go home. I had walked only a short distance, not more than a block, and the sidewalk still was quite crowded, when I felt something touch my hand. I turned quickly and glanced at the nearest person, but none seemed to have any interest in me or to be the one who had left it."

“Left what?” Chick inquired curiously.

“The leather bag.” Miss Fielding gazed at him more intently, as if really glad to have found some one in whom she could confide and depend upon for advice. “The leather bag—it had been placed in my hand by some person. That is to say, sir, I now think that it was, though I then was not quite sure of it.”

“Why so? Explain,” said Chick attentively.

“Well, sir, there were many people passing in each direction at the time, and it all occurred so quickly and was so very singular that I was quite confused. But there was the leather bag in my right hand, and

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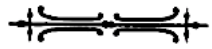
I thought at first that I might accidentally have torn it from the belt or the long neck chain of some passing woman. I could see no woman near me, however, and I now feel sure that the bag was quickly and stealthily placed in my hand.”



"That was, indeed, a strange experience," said Chick. "What did you do about it? What followed?"

"I looked for some one from whom I could have accidentally taken it or who might have given it to me," Nellie continued. "As I already have said, however, no one appeared to have any interest in me, and there was no woman near me."

"Was it a woman's hand bag or a purse?"

"It was more like a small purse, one that could be easily held in one hand," Nellie explained. "I felt the shape and heard the clink of coins in it, moreover, which made me think it was a purse. And then I—oh, sir, I'm only a poor girl, dependent upon what I earn to support myself and a crippled sister —I thought I had come into possession of some money. I did wrong. I was impelled to keep it. I yielded to temptation. I——"

"All that was perfectly natural, Miss Fielding, under the circumstances," Chick kindly interposed when tears suddenly appeared in her blue eyes. "You cannot be

consistently blamed. Tell me what you did and what followed?"

"When I saw that I was not observed, or so it then appeared, I concealed the bag under my coat and hurried on for a short distance, until I could safely look into it and learn what it contained. I did so under

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a lamp on a corner, when well away from the crowd that had left the theater."

"What did you find in the bag?" Chick inquired.

"It contained a small handkerchief, some gold coins, and a diamond ring. Oh, how it glittered!" she exclaimed, with quiet enthusiasm. "I gasped with amazement when I saw it. I bent my head nearer to peer into the bag, and then—oh, what a strange feeling came over me!"

"Explain," said Chick. "Describe it."

"I don't know that I can," Miss Fielding replied. "I never felt so before. I seemed to

be losing myself, so to speak, and everything suddenly grew dim."

"Did you feel ill or——"

"No, sir, not at all. The sensation was only momentary, as when one suddenly faints. Then all became dark. I don't know what I did or what followed. I knew nothing more, sir, until I revived on a cot in the hospital and saw the physician and the nurse bending over me. That is all I know about it, sir, all I can tell you."

Chick had been watching her intently, and he was sure that she had told the truth. It was a strange story, nevertheless, a remarkable experience, and he began to rack his brain for an explanation.

"I believe all you have said, Miss Fielding," he assured her. "Have you any idea what overcame you?"

"No, sir," said she earnestly. "Not the slightest idea. It is terribly mysterious."

"Did it occur immediately after you opened the bag?"

"Yes, sir, almost immediately; surely within two or three seconds."

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"When you bent nearer to look into the bag?"

"Yes, sir."

"Had you removed the handkerchief?"

"No, sir. The gold coins and ring were on top of it."

"Had you detected any odor from it, that of perfumery or——"

"No, sir, nothing," Nellie interposed. "I would have done so, perhaps, if there had been any, for I held it quite near my face."

"That is the very point," said Chick, smiling. "I now suspect that the handkerchief was impregnated with some odorless, but very powerful drug, which instantly affected you. Naturally, in your surprise, you would have inhaled it freely, and I think that is how you were so quickly overcome."

"That may explain it," Miss Fielding admitted. "But it all was very, very strange."

"Can you recall anything that immediately followed?"

"No, sir, absolutely nothing."

"But you can tell me just where it occurred?"

"Oh, yes," Nellie nodded quickly. "It was on the corner of Main and Maple Streets. There is an all-night lunch cart nearly opposite. I remember seeing it, and that is why I am sure of the precise location."

"Very good," said Chick, smiling again. "Now tell me, Miss Fielding, why you asked for the leather bag before leaving the hospital. You claimed to have missed it."

"I did, sir," she readily admitted. "I suddenly remembered it and thought I would take it and try to

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find the owner. I did not think of its having been the cause of my trouble."

"But why did you not explain the circumstances to Doctor Devoll and insist

upon searching for the bag? You afterward said you were not sure you had it."

"Well, sir, it suddenly occurred to me that I might be suspected of stealing it," Nellie explained, blushing again. "That thought alarmed me, and I was anxious only to leave the hospital and go home as quickly as possible. That is why, too, I gave the physician a false name and address. I wanted to wash my hands of the whole affair and avoid any publicity."

"Very good. I don't much blame you," Chick laughed, with a nod of approval. "I guess you have told me a straight story, Miss Fielding."

"I have told you the truth, sir," she said earnestly. "I hope nothing more will——"

"Oh, there is nothing for you to fear," Chick hastened to assure her. "Say nothing about it to others or about me, and you probably will hear no more of it. If you do learn anything more, however, write for me to call and see you. A line to John Blaisdell, Wilton House, will reach me."

Miss Fielding promised to comply, and wrote the name on a sheet of paper.

Chick said a few more words to reassure her, and he then departed and hastened to the corner of Main and Maple Streets, where the girl had so mysteriously lost consciousness. He saw at a glance that the surroundings, aside from the lunch cart a few rods away, would have been favorable at midnight for the knavish trick that he now was sure had been turned.

Crossing over, he found the proprietor of the lunch

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cart alone, and he called him to the door, a shrewd, keen-eyed Irish chap in the twenties.

"I'm looking into a job that was pulled off about twelve o'clock night before last," Chick informed him. "Did you happen to see a girl standing alone on the opposite corner about that time?"

"Faith, sir, I did," nodded the other quickly. "I was here at my door, sir, hoping to hook

onto some customers from the theater. The girl stopped under the lamp and was looking at something."

"That's the one," said Chick. "Do you know how long she remained there?"

"Not more than a couple of minutes. Then a man joined her and a motor cab showed up. They got into it and rode away."

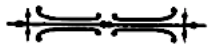
"With the cabman?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you describe either man?" asked Chick.

"Faith, I don't think so," was the reply. "I didn't notice them closely, not thinking of anything wrong. Besides, the cabman didn't leave his seat. The other was about medium size, I'd say, and wore a dark suit. I would not swear to it, but I think he had a dark beard, too."

"Quite likely," Chick said dryly. "Do you know from which direction he came?"



"Up the street, sir. I reckoned that he was following the girl, and that she was waiting for him. That's how it struck me."

"Did the cab come from the same direction?"

"It did. I supposed the man had called it."

"Did the girl go with him willingly?"

"She sure did, sir, for all I could see. The man

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took her arm and helped her in, and then they rode away. That's all there was to it."

Chick saw that this man could tell him nothing more definite, and he left him, to believe, as he had said, that there was nothing more to it.

"All the same, by Jove, the mystery seems only the deeper," he said to himself while walking away. "Why was Nellie Fielding, as well as three girls before her, temporarily abducted and left unconscious in the hospital grounds? Neither was subjected to any further harm, any personal outrage, and

robbery surely was not the motive. What was it, then? What could be gained? Why were such chances repeatedly taken? There must have been something to gain, but I'll be hanged if I can fathom what. Deeper mystery is right. There must be a big game or a most knavish one, somewhere under the surface."

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CHAPTER XI.

THE ANGLE OF REFLECTION.

Doctor David Devoll, whose will and word were law in the Osgood Hospital, gazed intently at the card brought in by his personal attendant. He was seated at a broad, flat desk in the middle of his private room, a sanctuary into which few would have dared to intrude after having once offended in that way.

For of all the rules and regulations of this institution, there was none more inflexible, none more rigorously enforced, than that

forbidding intrusion upon the privacy of Doctor David Devoll.

And when, perchance, it was violated, which was very, very seldom, the unfortunate offender had cause to long remember that suavity and smoothness in a man may sometimes serve only to hide, like the sleek coat of a leopard, very sharp claws and merciless teeth.

Doctor Devoll rubbed the top of his bald head with his slender hands, gazing at the card and muttering the name inscribed on it.

"Blaisdell—John Blaisdell—I do not place him. Written with a pen, eh? Do you know the man, Shannon?"

"Not from a side of leather."

"Not even by sight?"

"Never laid eyes on him. He's a new one to my lamps."

Shannon's terse replies seemed to issue with husky quietude from the uppermost depths of his throat.

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They were neither refined nor respectful. They smacked of closer relations than those of master and servant, as also appeared in his confidential attitude and air of assurance. For he was bowed over the desk, with both hands spread upon it, a broad, compact, muscular man of fifty, with the bullet head of a pugilist and the strength of a bull. He was clad in livery, nevertheless—a bottle-green jacket and trousers, trimmed with black braid.

"He stated, you say, that he has private business with me." Doctor Devoll gazed up from the card with a sinister gleam in his cold blue eyes.

"That's what he said."

"But not to what it relates?"

"Not he!" Shannon grinned. "He ducked my question, as if it were a right swing. When I have private business with a man, says he, I don't confide it to his servant. That was how he countered."

Doctor Devoll's thin lips took on a smile that did not improve his facial expression,

usually very agreeable and benign. He said deliberately:

"You may show him in, Shannon. Wait. Don't let his business be too private, not too private, Shannon," he added significantly, pointing to a curtained door. "Slip around there after admitting him and wait until he goes. You may be needed."

"I'll do better than that. If needed, Dave, I'll be—here!"

"Very good. Show him in."

Shannon straightened up, smoothed his bottle-green jacket with his palms, and stalked with stilty stiffness through the opposite door, closing it after him.

Doctor Devoll reverted to the card.

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"Written with a pen," he repeated, his eyes squinted and gleaming. "But not on one of our office blanks. Most men have a printed card or engraved. Written with a pen. One might rightly infer from that, perhaps, that his name is not—Blaisdell."

Obviously, Doctor Devoll was more than ordinarily discerning.

Shannon had, in the meantime, returned to the man waiting in the hospital office. He then had all the earmarks of a well-trained butler, thoroughly conscious of his dignified functions.

“Pardon the delay, sir,” he said sedately. “Doctor Devoll was talking by telephone with a patient. He will see you. This way, sir.”

Nick followed him through the main corridor, then into a narrow diverging passageway, then down three steps and through a second narrow entry, at the end of which was the door of the physician’s private room. Shannon knocked and then opened it.

“Mr. Blaisdell, sir,” he announced.

The detective entered and Doctor Devoll arose to meet him, bowing and placing a chair.

"Take a seat, Mr. Blaisdell," he said blandly. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. I was busy with the telephone."

"Don't mention it," Nick replied. "I shall not take much of your valuable time."

He sat down while speaking, and his trained eyes quickly took in most of the details of the spacious, handsomely furnished room. Two windows overlooked the rear grounds. Each was entirely covered with an interior, painted wire screen, which precluded observation from outside, but through which one

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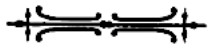
within could see plainly. There were roller shades and shutters, also, that would insure privacy after the lamps were lighted.

The detective saw at once that he was in a rear room in the main building. He could see the broad sweep of the rear lawn, the back street in the near distance, a gravel path leading out to it through the park, evidently from a near rear door. He no sooner was seated, moreover, than he saw something

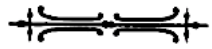


else—which would have been seen and appreciated by only one detective in a million.

The broad, flat desk was between him and one of the windows, the light from which struck the top of the desk at an angle, causing a slight glare on its smooth leather surface. Two spots that broke this glare, however, apart from some books and papers nearer the chair from which the physician had arisen, instantly caught the detective's eye.

There was no mistaking the shape of them, nor what had caused them. They were the broad outlines of a man's hands, outspread while he leaned over the desk, and the moisture from which still lingered on the smooth leather.

"By Jove, I've hit a pair of liars!" thought Nick instantly, though his strong, clean-cut face did not change by so much as a shadow. "That fellow in livery was leaning over the desk, with both hands spread on it, directly opposite the chair from which this doctor arose. The dampness from them has not yet



dried from the leather, nor would it have been imparted to it unless the hands were there for several moments. That's an unusual and remarkably confidential attitude for a servant. The telephone is in one corner and

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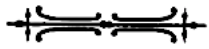
ten feet from the desk. I'll wager, by Jove! that the doctor was not using it, and that something else occasioned the delay, possibly a conference concerning me and my mission. Both lied about the telephone, as sure as I'm a foot high, but for what reason?"

Obviously, of course, these shrewd deductions were mere impressions that flashed very swiftly through the detective's mind, rather than a process of deliberate reasoning. Naturally, too, they instantly gave rise to new and somewhat startling suspicions, which, with characteristic self-control, Carter was careful to conceal.

Doctor Devoll had pattered around his desk, in the meantime, and was taking the chair from which he had arisen.



"I am not busy just now, Mr. Blaisdell," he said. "I can give you what time you want. What's the trouble? You don't look like a man afflicted with any physical ailment."

Nick laughed lightly and shook his head, sizing up with augmented interest this bald, thin-featured, smooth-spoken physician who, so singularly and unexpectedly, had now incurred his distrust.

"No, nothing of the kind," he replied. "If all men were as strong and healthy as I am, Doctor Devoll, those of your profession would find it hard sledding."

"That is fortunate for you, at least," smiled the physician.

"My business with you relates to another matter," the detective added.

"Private business—or so my man informed me."

"Yes."

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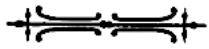
"Concerning what?" Doctor Devoll's narrow eyes took on a searching squint.



“I want to ask you about the girl who was found unconscious in the hospital grounds late last night,” Nick explained. “More precisely, I want your opinion of her condition and the cause of it, as well as of the three previous cases very closely resembling it. It strikes me——”

“One moment, sir,” Doctor Devoll interrupted. “Why are you specially interested in the case?”

“Is that material?” Nick inquired, smiling.

“Quite so. I am not in the habit of discussing my cases with strangers. I want to know to whom I express an opinion, and for what reason and by what right it is asked.”

“Otherwise, Doctor Devoll, you do not express it?” queried the detective, noting a subtle ring in the other’s voice. “Is that what I am to infer?”

“Exactly.” Doctor Devoll nodded. “Reticence would denote a covert motive on your part in seeking my opinion. I would not stand for that for a moment. I must be met

halfway or I will not discuss a case with any visitor."

"That seems to be a consistent position, I'm sure," Carter admitted. "I will tell you, therefore, why I am interested in this case. It was brought to my notice by Chief Gleason, of the police department, at whose request I am investigating it."

"You are a detective, then."

"Well, merely to that extent," Nick allowed evasively.

"I see." Doctor Devoll stroked his black frock coat

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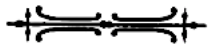
and drew up in his chair. "Let me ask you one more question, Mr. Blaisdell."

"Certainly."

"Why is an investigation thought to be necessary?"

"Don't you consider it wise?"

"For the police to butt in?" Doctor Devoll said a bit sharply. "I can't say that I do."



"No?"

"Why should they interfere? What was there in either case that demands police investigation?" Doctor Devoll curtly questioned. "A girl was overcome, was addicted to a drug, or a dope of some kind, and wandered into the hospital grounds. She was found and brought in here. I revived her and she immediately insisted upon going home. That's all there was to any one of the cases. Why, I repeat, do they require police investigation?"

"I cannot conceive, Doctor Devoll, that you have any personal objection to an investigation," Nick remarked dryly, smiling again.

A tinge of red leaped up in the physician's cheeks. A sharper gleam shot from his squinted eyes. He detected a covert insinuation in his visitor's tone. He felt that he had said too much, perhaps, for he quickly retorted:

"Not the slightest objection, Mr. Blaisdell, not the slightest objection. I merely fail to

see why an investigation is necessary. There are hundreds of dope fiends in every large city, but in none of them have the police a very great interest. Why their activity, then, in these cases? What do they suspect?"

"Don't you think that four such cases warrant suspicion?" the detective blandly inquired.

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"Not more than the hundreds I have mentioned."

"But all were found in the hospital grounds," Carter pointed out suggestively.

"What of that?" Doctor Devoll demanded. "A coincidence. Nothing else. One may have been influenced by having read of the others. There is no accounting for the doings of a drug fiend."

"There is some truth in that," Nick admitted.

"Let it go at that, then," said Doctor Devoll, with a wave of his slender hands. "I wanted only to learn your opinion, your grounds for suspicion. You now are welcome to mine. I will answer any question you care to ask."

"Thank you," said the detective, who now was taking a somewhat different course than he would have shaped if he had detected nothing denoting duplicity in the physician. "You think these girls were drug fiends, do you?"

"I don't know positively," Doctor Devoll said quickly. "I am not sure that the coma in which I found them was the cause of a drug. There is a possibility, of course, that the cause was a temporary atrophy of the cerebral nerves."

"But you intimated to Sergeant Brady that they were drugged," Nick reminded him.

"That was and still is what I suspect, but I am not sure of it," Doctor Devoll retorted. "I had not time to look deeply into either case. My duty was to restore my patient, which I succeeded in doing, and each of them then insisted upon departing and going home."

"Why didn't you detain them?"

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"I had no right to do so. One may leave here as soon as able. This is not a police station."

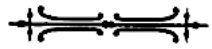
“But why didn’t you question them about their habits, Doctor Devoll, and insist upon knowing their names?” the detective asked more pointedly.

“I did so in the last case.”

“Why not in the others? It strikes me——”

“Stop a moment,” Doctor Devoll interrupted, lurching forward in his chair. “I run this institution, Mr. Blaisdell, and I’m not going to be bothered in this way nor have my conduct picked to pieces by the police. When another case turns up, I would advise your having her taken to headquarters. You then can call another physician. Get him to restore her. He may know more than I.

“You can hold the girl, charge her with something, frame her up in any way you like, which is quite in a line with police methods, and, perhaps, you can force her to impart all the information you want. I know no other way by which you can learn the truth.”



Doctor Devoll arose with the last, signifying that he would not prolong the interview. Carter had let him run on without interrupting, noting his impatience and a more threatening shrillness in his voice. He decided not to question him further. He arose and took his hat, saying with ominous quietude:

"There is another way, Doctor Devoll, and I shall find it. I'm going to dig out the whole truth, not only in these cases, but also in the sudden mysterious death of Gaston Todd. There is, I now feel sure, quite a close relation between all of these cases and the many mysterious robberies that have recently been committed in Madison. I want the whole truth, Doctor

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Devoll, and I'm out to get it. Take it from me—I'll find the way."

"I wish you much success." Doctor Devoll's thin lips took on a rather sardonic smile. "I wish you much and speedy success, Mr. Blaisdell. This way, sir, if you are going. Call again. I shall be interested to know how

you succeed and to learn the true inwardness of these mysteries. Ah, here is my man. Show Mr. Blaisdell the way, Shannon, if you please. Call again, sir; call again."

"Thank you. I think it highly probable," said Carter, with singular dryness.

Doctor Devoll bowed, still smiling, and closed the door, to which he had accompanied the detective.

Nick Carter followed Shannon out by the way he had entered, departing without so much as a word to the burly attendant. There was a suspicious gleam in the latter's eyes, however, while he watched the departing detective through one of the office windows. Turning abruptly, as if hit with a sudden idea, he closed the office door and then called up the police headquarters by telephone.

"Hello!" said he, with a voice very unlike his own. "One of Carter's assistants is talking from the Wilton House. Do you know where I can find him?"

A sergeant answered, one who happened to know of Carter's relations with the chief, but upon whom the above inquiry made no impression and was not afterward recalled.

"I do not," he replied. "He has not been here since morning."

Shannon hung up the receiver; then arose and hurried back to rejoin the physician.

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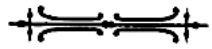
"I'm wise, Dave," he announced, with an exultant snarl. "I've nailed him."

Doctor Devoll swung around from the fireplace, near which he was standing.

"Wise to what?" he demanded. "Do you mean that you know him?"

"You bet I know him. Brady, you remember, telephoned to a man named Blaisdell last night, who is at the Wilton House. It just struck me that Gleason has employed outside detectives. There is just one crack sleuth whom he most likely would want. I have phoned to headquarters, saying I was his assistant and asking if he was there. I was told that he was there this morning.



That does settle it. You have just been talking, Dave, with the famous New York detective, the worst ever—Nick Carter."

Doctor Devoll started slightly and for a moment appeared incredulous. Then his teeth met with a vicious snap. His face changed as if he had been suddenly turned to a devil incarnate.

"You are sure of it, Shannon, sure of it?" he questioned, with a sibilant hiss.

"Dead sure, Dave," Shannon insisted. "There's nothing to it."

"Nick Carter, eh? The worst ever, eh?" Doctor Devoll gave way to a mirthless, derisive laugh. "We'll see about that. We'll see about that, Shannon. He shall find that he has met one worthy of his steel, one who will balk, thwart, and laugh at him. Or, if need be, Shannon, who will wipe him from the face of the earth!"

Shannon shrugged his broad shoulders and smiled grimly. It was not the first time that he had heard

such sentiments as these, and seen that same gleam and glitter in the eyes of the man confronting him, eyes with a glare like that of madness.

"You will not quit, then?" he said inquiringly.

"Quit!" Doctor Devoll sneered scornfully. "Only curs and cowards quit, Shannon, and throw up the sponge. Sit down at my desk. Sit down and write what I dictate. Your hand will never be suspected."

Shannon obeyed him without a protest. He was accustomed to yielding to this man, to obeying him without question. He sat down at the desk, taking the pen and paper which the physician provided. Half an hour had passed when Doctor Devoll ended his dictation and gave the other his instructions.

Shannon arose and went to change his livery for street attire.

Doctor Devoll, with face still reflecting his vicious sentiments, gazed intently at his desk for several moments. Then he started abruptly, having decided what course he

would shape, and hurriedly opened a safe in one corner, taking from it a small rubber mask, which he quickly adjusted over his mouth and nostrils. Then he took from an inner compartment—a small leather bag.

Out of the latter he drew a crumpled handkerchief, lady's size, and hurriedly cast it with the bag into the fireplace. A blue flame sprang up, hissing audibly, denoting that the handkerchief was saturated with a very volatile and inflammable substance of some kind. The physician watched them burn, smiling sardonically; then forced the charred remains deep among the glowing embers.

"Nick Carter, eh?" he muttered, relocking the mask

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in his safe. "He suspects me, does he? He'll corner me, will he? We shall see—we shall see!"

When Shannon returned, he had a disguise in his hand, which he was placing temporarily in his pocket.

Doctor Devoll started up from his desk with two sealed letters, which he had hurriedly written. He gave them to his attendant, saying sharply, with eyes gleaming again:

"This to Toby Monk. This to Tim Hurst. Be wary when leaving the other, Shannon, both wary and watchful. Nick Carter, eh? We shall see, Shannon, we shall see!"

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CHAPTER XII.

NICK CARTER'S DEDUCTIONS.

It was six o'clock when Nick Carter returned to the Wilton House. Daylight was deepening to dusk. The last editions of the local newspapers were out, and the shrill voices of juvenile venders could be heard from all directions. The detective glanced at the papers, which in headline luridness proclaimed:

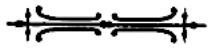
"Leading Lawyer Suspected in Todd Murder! Frank Paulding Arrested! Chief Gleason Sure of His Man!"

Nick Carter smiled faintly, but with a more threatening gleam and glitter deep down in his eyes, when these varied cries of the newsboys reached his ears. He bought a paper from one, thrusting it into his pocket, and entered the hotel.

"Gleason has made good, all right," he muttered while seeking the elevator. "That will make it easier for me, as well as all this, which is precisely what I expected. But it's up to me, by Jove! and must be done quickly, or good night to my reputation."

He referred to what he had overheard while threading his way through the unusual throng in the hotel office. There was much excitement and only one matter under discussion—the alleged murder, the mystery shrouding it, the strange death of the victim, and divers opinions regarding the suspected man.

The detective went up to his suite, where, as he expected, he found Chick and Patsy waiting for him, the former eager to report what he had learned from



Nellie Fielding. It took him only a few moments, and apparently, as Chick had reasoned, it seemed only to deepen the mystery. It brought a look of grim satisfaction, however, to the face of the listening detective.

"I cannot see that it sheds any light on the case," Chick added perplexedly.

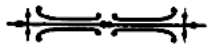
"It does, Chick, nevertheless," Carter said confidently.

"Does it dovetail with something you have discovered?"

"You may judge for yourself. I'll tell you what I saw and learned during my call on Doctor Devoll."

He proceeded to do so, but the look of perplexity still lingered on Chick's face, and Patsy appeared dubiously puzzled.

"It is somewhat significant, if you are right, chief, that both Doctor Devoll and his man lied to you," Chick said thoughtfully. "But I don't see that what the physician said to you or the position he took cuts any ice."



"You don't, eh?" returned Carter, smiling grimly. "It cuts quite thick ice, Chick."

"Why so? I don't get you."

"Gee whiz, chief, nor do I," put in Patsy. "What do you mean? Come across with it."

"First, a word about the girl, Nellie Fielding, and what befell her," said Carter. "It probably is precisely what befell the others, and all were victims of the same crook and his assistant. Just what game he was playing and with what object remains to be learned."

"But——"

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"Wait a bit!" Carter cut in. "You'll get me presently. Nellie Fielding evidently told you the truth. The mysterious bag was deftly slipped into her hand. She did what the others did, when she could discover no owner for it. She kept it until well away from the crowd, then opened it to see what it contained. As you have inferred, Chick, something in the bag, probably that with which the handkerchief was saturated, immediately overcame her. A very powerful

and mysterious gas may have been liberated from the bag, and it naturally would have been inhaled by the girl when she peered into it."

"That seemed to me the most plausible theory," said Chick.

"It has become rather more than a theory," Carter replied. "I now am almost sure of it."

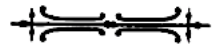
"For other reasons?"

"Yes. To continue, it is safe to assume that the girl was constantly watched. The moment she lost herself, for she certainly lost consciousness to some extent, at least, she was taken away by two men and placed on the seat in the hospital grounds, then wholly unconscious, where Policeman Donovan found her."

"Barclay was right, then," said Chick. "That was the cab seen by the artist."

"Undoubtedly."

"But why was the girl taken into the hospital grounds?"



"That's one point," said Carter. "So that, when discovered, she would surely be taken into the hospital—where Doctor Devoll would be the one to treat her."

"You think——"

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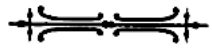
"One moment. Don't force me ahead of my story. These circumstances require careful and thorough analysis."

"Go ahead, then."

"Bear in mind that Doctor Devoll treated all four of these cases. He treated them successfully. They did not appear to baffle him, or even mystify him, I suspect. Bear in mind, too, that he did not detain the girls, did not question them closely, or seek to learn their names, even, with the exception of Nellie Fielding. Remember, too, that the mysterious leather bag, which Sergeant Brady knows was taken into the wardroom, could not be found. Take it from me—Doctor Devoll was the one who got away with it."



"By Jove! all that does appear deucedly suspicious," Chick now declared. "It may explain, too, Devoll's attitude this afternoon."

"Exactly."

"Exactly, chief, is right," cried Patsy. "Gee! things are beginning to brighten up."

"Let's go a step farther," Carter continued. "All of the mysterious robberies and holdups during the past three months, which we were called here to investigate, were of a very similar character, and all bore a striking likeness to what befell Nellie Fielding. The victims invariably were found unconscious after the crime, though afterward were quite easily restored, and all told the same story—that of being confronted by a person who, in some mysterious way, caused them to immediately lose consciousness and then deliberately robbed them."

"You think all of these cases, then, were the work of the same gang of crooks."

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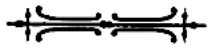

"That is precisely what I think," Carter said more forcibly. "I am convinced of it by their similarity and the mysterious means employed, which show plainly that the knave back of the whole business is an exceedingly capable and well-informed rascal. He must be an expert in drugs, or have discovered some chemical compound the quality and effect of which are not known by other physicians and scientists."

"Do you suspect that Doctor Devoll is the criminal?" Chick inquired.

"I do not like his looks, his conduct in these cases, or the position he took when I questioned him."

"But it seems really improbable that a man of his prominence and profession would be engaged in such knavery," Chick argued.

"That's what every one would say, and it would be deucedly difficult to convince them of his guilt," Carter replied. "That could be done only by producing positive evidence of it."

"Very true."

"It may be equally difficult to find that evidence," Carter added. "It must be found, nevertheless, assuming that I am right. In no other way can we make good."

"True again," Chick admitted.

"I was very careful, therefore, not to betray that I suspected him. I pretended to swallow all that he handed out, and let it go at that. One word more, now, and I will have covered all of the ground. That relates to the Todd murder."

"What about it?"

"The mystery is as to how and with what means it

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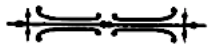
was committed. You know what the autopsy revealed— —"

"Next to nothing," put in Patsy.

"That's the very point," said Nick. "Chemical tests may reveal the presence of poison. Doctor Marvin thinks, however, and I am of the same opinion, that Todd was killed with some kind of poisonous gas."



"Great Scott! that seems next to impossible," Chick declared. "Consider the time, the public place, and all of the circumstances. Todd was telephoned to come to the Waldmere Chambers and wait in the corridor. It was done at a moment's notice, so to speak, with a view to incriminating Frank Paulding, if your suspicions are correct. How in thunder could a poisonous gas be administered to a man under such conditions?"

"Gee whiz! it does look like an utter impossibility, chief," said Patsy.

"Or the work of an exceedingly bold and accomplished crook, the same crook who committed these other mysterious crimes," Carter insisted. "Their similarity convinces me, as I have said, that all were the work of the same man and same gang."

"That much does seem probable," Chick allowed. "There is no getting around it."

"And it's up to us to get after them and find the evidence needed to identify and convict them," Carter said flatly. "Now, Patsy, what

have you learned? Is there any man who might properly term himself Todd's running mate? That's what the telephone girl heard."

"I have not been able to find one, chief," Patsy reported.

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"There seems to be no man with whom he was specially friendly."

"Nor any tenant in the Waldmere Chambers whom he was in the habit of visiting?"

"Not that I could learn," Patsy again replied in the negative. "I questioned the janitor and several others. Not one of them had ever seen Todd in the building. So far as I could learn, chief, he never visited the Waldmere Chambers."

"All the more reason, then, for suspecting that he was lured there that day only to be killed."

"But I have learned one fact, chief," Patsy added.

"What is that?"

“Todd had a suite here in the Wilton House for the past two years. About a month ago, however, he changed his quarters to the Studley. That is an apartment house in Dale Street. His suite is on the second floor.”

“He may have had some secret motive for the change,” Carter said thoughtfully. “The hotel may have been too public a place for something in which he was secretly engaged. We must look into that. No investigation in his apartments has yet been made.”

“We had better make one, then,” Chick suggested.

“I was coming to that. You go there this evening and see what you can find. Search for letters, papers, or anything that might shed a ray of light on the case.”

“Leave it to me,” Chick nodded. “I’ll go through his suite with a fine-tooth comb.”

“Accomplish it secretly, however, if possible,” Carter quickly directed. “I don’t want our doings and designs suspected by the miscreants back of this

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knavery. I want to keep them in the dark as long as possible."

"Leave it to me. I'll turn the trick without being seen," Chick predicted confidently.

"In the meantime, Patsy, you go at once to the Osgood Hospital and watch for any move by Doctor Devoll," said Nick, abruptly turning to him. "My visit may, if my suspicions are warranted, alarm him into taking steps that would clinch them. Shadow him, if he goes out, and watch him constantly."

"Enough said, chief," cried Patsy, springing up to get his hat. "He'll be a good one, indeed, if he gets by me with a move of any kind. I'll soon have my lamps on him."

Patsy did not wait for an answer. He was out and away almost as soon as the last was said.

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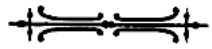


CHAPTER XIII.
THE MAN WITH A MASK.

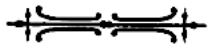
Nick Carter met with a surprise when he went down to dine with Chick, after the hurried departure of Patsy Garvan. The office clerk, seeing them going to the dining room, took a letter from a rack and beckoned to the detective, saying, when he approached:

"This appears to be for you, Mr. Blaisdell."

Nick took it and glanced at the pen-written address—Mr. John Blaisdell, Wilton House.

He saw that it was not stamped, however, and wondered who had left a letter for him, instead of seeking a personal interview. Much more to his surprise, upon removing the inclosed sheet, he found that it bore no signature and was addressed, not fictitiously, but to—Mr. Nicholas Carter.

"What's the meaning of this?" he muttered, frowning. "Has it leaked out that I am in Madison?"



He lingered in the office and read the letter, while Chick approached and joined him, noting his ominous expression. For the letter read as follows:

"Mr. Nicholas Carter: You may fool others with a false name, but not the writer. He is not so easily blinded. Your identity is known, also your mission, but you are barking up the wrong tree and are booked for failure. You will make the mistake of your life, a fatal mistake, if you remain here and persist in the work you have undertaken. It will cost you what man holds most dear—your life.

"I am very well aware, Carter, that you are not

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easily influenced by threats, and ordinarily ignore them. I want to impress it upon you, therefore, that I am not an ordinary person, and that I invariably do what I threaten.

"You will doubt my ability to do so. Your abnormal bump of conceit will cause you to think you can protect yourself and avert

your impending fate. Disabuse yourself of that idea. You cannot possibly escape me.

"On the other hand, Carter, I do not wish to wipe you off the map unless you force me to do so. Don't make it imperative. Don't fly into the face of fate. Your safety lies in returning to New York and minding your own business. Madison is too small for both of us.

"Lest you underestimate your danger and disregard this warning, however, and that I may be spared needless bloodshed, if possible, I will try to convince you that I am right, that I am vastly your superior, and that I hold your life in my hand. You are said to be a past master of the art of detecting and preventing crime.

"On Thursday evening next an elaborate reception and ball are to be held by the National Guards. Mrs. Mortimer Thurlow will be among the guests. She is very wealthy. She owns a superb rope of pearls. It is worth eighty thousand dollars. She will wear it that evening.

"I am going to steal it.

"I invite you to prevent me.

"If you succeed, you will have convinced me that you are capable of guarding yourself from the fate I have threatened.

"If you fail—you should be wise enough to realize your peril and take my advice. I repeat it. Lose not a moment in leaving Madison—or you will return to New York in a coffin."

Nick Carter's brows knitted closer while he read this

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threatening letter. He had turned so that Chick might also read it, and the latter muttered, when both had finished:

"Great guns! Who the devil wrote that?"

"It comes suspiciously soon after my call on Doctor Devoll," Nick said pointedly.

"Do you think he sent it?"

"I don't know, of course, nor do I care."

"It's an infernal bluff."

“Less a bluff than you suppose,” corrected Carter, a bit grimly. “The writer means what he says.”

“That he will kill you?”

“If I give him a chance or don’t kill him.”

“You will ignore it, and— —”

“And accept his challenge—surely!” Nick cut in. “Wait one moment. I want to question Burton.”

They had remained near the office inclosure, to which he now turned and called the clerk, asking quietly:

“Who brought this letter, Mr. Burton? I see it is not stamped.”

Burton laughed a bit oddly and shook his head.

“I don’t know, Mr. Blaisdell,” he replied. “I found it on the cigar case. I was somewhat mystified when I saw it, for I had sold two men some cigars only a moment before, and the letter was not there.”

"One of them left it there, perhaps," Nick suggested, intending to get a description of the men, in that case.

"Impossible." Burton spoke decidedly. "They walked away before I closed the show case, and I saw them leaving the house."

"Did you see any one else near the show case?"

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"Not a person. I discovered the letter, nevertheless, within a couple of minutes."

"How long ago?"

"Not more than five minutes. I was intending to send the letter up to your room. I hope the delay is of no consequence," Burton added.

"None whatever," Carter assured him. "Come, Chick, we'll go in to dinner."

"It's plain enough that some one slipped in here and seized an opportunity to leave the letter without being seen," Chick remarked.

"That's about the size of it."

“Will you do anything more about it?”

“Not at present.”

“Or change your plans?”

“Not an iota,” said Carter decidedly. “I am not to be intimidated by threats. I may decide, however, to attend the ball of the National Guards. If Mrs. Mortimer Thurlow wears her rope of pearls, and the writer of this letter attempts to steal it, he will end with having it stuffed down his knavish throat. Vastly my superior, eh? We’ll see about that.”

The detective thrust the threatening letter into his pocket with the last, obviously averse to further discussing it, and the subject was abruptly dropped.

None could have sized up the letter more correctly or more keenly have realized its full significance. Carter knew that his identity had been discovered by the very crooks he was seeking, by the evil genius directing them, in spite of his precautions to prevent it. He knew that a ball had been set rolling which, urged on by the mysterious

criminal forces back of it, would tax his utmost powers to successfully oppose.

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It was about eight o'clock when Chick left the hotel, suitably clad and well equipped for the stealthy work assigned him. A brisk walk of about ten minutes took him to Dale Street, in a desirable residential section, and presently the lofty brick walls and numerous lighted windows of the Studley, a somewhat exclusive apartment house, loomed up on the opposite side.

He paused and viewed it briefly, noting that a narrow court flanked one end of the building. He saw that there was no public office, also that the broad, main entrance and vestibule were brightly lighted.

"A suite on the second floor," he said to himself. "The windows don't appeal to me. It ought not to be very difficult to get into an unoccupied suite without being seen. I believe it can be more easily done from within than without. I'll have a look."

Crossing over, he entered the vestibule and consulted the tiny placards under the

numerous electric bells, on one of which he presently found the number of Todd's suite. At the same moment he heard the heavy inner door opened, and two fashionably clad women came out.

"Pardon!" Chick approached them, instantly seizing the opportunity presented. "If you will be so kind, it will save me from using my key."

"Certainly." One of the women smiled, while she prevented the door from closing.

The other eyed Chick a bit sharply, but he bowed and murmured a word of thanks; then passed both and entered, as complacently as if he owned the house.

"Very opportune," he muttered dryly. "They would think me a crook, all right, if they were to see the key I intended to use. Without having seen it, in

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fact, one appeared to have a vague impression that I had no legitimate business here. I must contrive to avoid other eyes."

He had closed the door and was gazing up a broad, dimly lighted stairway while indulging in these reflections. He could hear no sound from the corridor of the second floor. He stole up noiselessly and found it deserted.

Glancing at the numbers on the nearest doors, he quickly learned in which direction he must turn, and he brought up within a minute at the door he was seeking—that of the suite lately occupied by the murdered man. It adjoined a diverging corridor, and its windows overlooked the narrow court mentioned.

In the meantime, for so fate sometimes brings opposing forces together, and often with disastrous results, a man moving with the stealth of an evil shadow, which any chance observer would surely have thought him, had entered the narrow court and paused under one of the several small platforms some ten feet above the ground, each the base of a rise of iron stairs forming a fire escape.

This man was clad from head to foot in black. It seemed to mingle with the almost ebon gloom in the court. He lingered only briefly. He quickly fastened a black mask on his bearded face; then took a coiled rope from under his coat. He cast it deftly around a corner standard of the platform railing, up both lengths of which he then drew himself, with the wiry strength and agility of an ape. Kneeling on the platform, he quickly drew up the rope and laid it aside; then turned to crouch with a thin strip of steel at the near window.

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It was at precisely the same moment that Chick Carter, alone in the corridor, set to work with a picklock to open the door of the suite. It took him about a minute. The bolt of the lock was shot back with a sharp, metallic sound—just as the fastening of the window was forced aside with an audible snap.

Each sound was mingled with the other. Each stealthy intruder heard only that which he had caused. The window was noiselessly

raised, moreover, just as Chick entered and quietly closed the door.

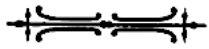
He had stepped into a handsomely furnished parlor. The other had entered a dining room. Between the two rooms was an open door, with a drawn portière. The feet of both men fell noiselessly on the carpets and rugs.

Chick moved toward the middle of the room and took out his electric lamp. Its beam of light leaped outward—just as the portière was drawn and a second beam of light appeared.

The two lenses were illumined at the same moment; in fact, confronting one another like two startled, suddenly opened eyes, with a glare that completely dispelled the gloom.

Two more astonished men seldom met. For an instant the sudden glare blinded both.

Chick's first thought was that he had flashed the light upon a panel mirror, reflecting it and himself. On the instant, however, he saw the door, the black-clad figure, the masked face and the glittering eyes gleaming through it.



“Great guns!” he gasped involuntarily. “Who are you?”

“Who are you?”

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The question was echoed with icy composure by the man backed by the swaying portière. His voice came with a sinister, metallic ring through his black mask. He did not stir from his position or move foot or finger.

Chick watched him to be sure of it. If a gun was to be drawn, he was resolved to be the first to draw it. He kept the glare of his searchlight on him, distinctly revealing him, while the masked unknown used his with like effect, but neither reached for a weapon. It impressed Chick as one of the most singular and sensational situations in which he had ever figured with a solitary man.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“What are you doing?” demanded the other.

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Nor have you answered mine.”

“I don’t intend to answer yours,” Chick said sternly.

“Nor I yours,” the masked man retorted coldly.

Chick felt almost inclined to laugh. He would have done so, if the case engaging him had been a less serious one, his mission less important, and with no occasion to conceal his visit. He frowned, instead, however, and shaped another course.

“You’d better change your mind,” he advised. “If you don’t——”

“Hold on,” snapped the “mask.” “Don’t you reach for a gun. I can pull one as quickly as you and shoot as straight. You keep your empty hand in sight or you’ll be a dead one.”

“You do the same, then,” Chick said sharply.

“That’s what I’m doing.”

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“Watch your step, then, and see that you don’t slip.”

"I'll watch you, all right. You can bet on that."

"You talk like a crook," said Chick tentatively.

"You've got nothing on me in that respect," the mask retorted dryly. "You sneaked in here like a thief."

"But I'm not a thief—nor are you."

"Is that so?"

"Not of the ordinary type. I'm hit with the truth."

"That beats being hit with a club. What's the big idea?"

"I know, now, why you are here."

"Solomon had nothing on you, then."

"Not much."

"Come on with it. What's the brainy hunch?"

"You are one of the gang that killed Gaston Todd," Chick again said sternly, and the shot was not entirely a random one. "You have come here to search his rooms, and to see

whether he has left evidence that might expose you. You are here to find it and get away with it."

"You're a real Willie Wisewinker," the masked man said with a sneer, and a threatening hiss crept into his voice. "But you have got nothing on me. I know you, too, all right. You are one of the Nick Carter bunch, out to cut a wide swath in Madison, if your tools don't go dull. You state only your own mission. You are here to search for evidence, hoping to find and get away with it unsuspected—but you have slipped a cog. You'll not search for it, much less get it."

"Oh, yes, I will," said Chick, who now had decided how he best could end the situation and quietly accomplish

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his object. "I'm going to get it, all right—and get you."

"Get me, eh?" The masked man laughed icily. "You have as good a chance of getting me as a hailstone would have on a red-hot stove."

"That so?"

"I know so."

"Why so confident?" Chick was edging nearer the man by imperceptible degrees. "You must have pals in the next room."

"No, no pals," sneered the other. "I don't need any."

"You're game to play a lone hand, eh?"

"Bet you! I'm the gamest ever."

"Nevertheless, I shall get you."

"Not much! You have not a look in, not even the ghost of a chance. You have not——"

"Haven't I? We'll see."

Scarce six feet divided the two men, and Chick had steadied himself for a lightninglike leap. He felt sure that he could quickly overcome the unknown man, despite his brazen assurance, if he could grapple with him before a revolver could be drawn, the discharge of which he wished to prevent, knowing it would alarm the house and be contrary to his chief's instructions.

He leaped while he spoke, and covered the distance with a single bound, dropping his searchlight.

The masked man dropped his, venting a wolfish snarl, and on the instant the two men were grappling in close embrace in the almost inky darkness.

Chick aimed to seize and confine both arms of his antagonist, but in the sudden gloom he missed them.

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The masked man had instantly raised both above his head, and the detective's muscular arms closed only around his black-clad figure.

It was a lithe, wiry figure, one that Chick felt sure he could crush and bend at will in his viselike embrace. Contrary to what he expected, however, and which he lurched to one side to avoid, no blow was dealt, no fist fell upon his head, no fierce fingers sought his throat.

Instead, the hands of the masked man dropped quickly and found those of the detective.

Then Chick felt a wire touch each wrist. Instantly ten million needles seemed to have been thrust full length into him. He tingled from head to foot with excruciating pain. His every muscle relaxed as if palsied. He gasped, tried vainly to shriek, and then the darkness of the room was turned to that of utter oblivion—and the masked man dropped him, as inert as a bag of sand, on the carpeted floor.

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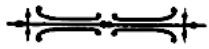
CHAPTER XIV.

A MARATHON PURSUIT.

Patsy Garvan arrived at the Osgood Hospital soon after six o'clock that evening, more than two hours before Chick encountered the masked man in Gaston Todd's apartments.

It then was dark, the sky clouded, with no stars to reveal his stealthy movements to



chance observers. Only the scattered street lamps and the numerous lighted windows of the great building, with those of a few more distant dwellings, relieved the prevailing gloom. It was even darker in the deserted grounds, and Patsy took advantage of the trees and shrubbery, entering the extensive estate near one corner, and stealing quickly around the west wing toward a rear part of the main building in which the private room of Doctor David Devoll was located.

Patsy knew from Carter's description, nevertheless, where to find him, and he presently paused near the rear door and the gravel walk leading out to the back street.

"I must find out, to begin with, whether the blooming sawbones is here," he said to himself. "There are the two windows of his room, all right, but there's no sign of a light. It looks very much as if he were absent."

Hugging the wall, and stealing closer, nevertheless, he cautiously crouched under the nearer of the two windows and tried to peer into the room. He then

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found that the roller shade was lowered and an interior shutter carefully closed, but through a chink below them he could see the reflection of a dim light on the varnished sill.

"Gee whiz! he makes dead sure that no outsider can see what's doing in there," thought Patsy. "He may be in some other part of the hospital, since only a dim light is burning. I'll have to stick round till I can get an eye on him."

As a matter of fact, however, Patsy had arrived there in the nick of time. The light in the room was suddenly extinguished. Half a minute later the sound of a turning knob, that of the rear door, broke the outside stillness, and, as quick as a flash, Patsy dropped flat on the ground close to the building.

He scarce had taken this precaution when the door was opened and the physician came out. Though Patsy never had seen him, Nick Carter had described him carefully and there was no mistaking him. His slender figure, invariably clad in a black frock coat, which

accentuated his leanness, was one very easily identified. His smooth-shaven face was dimly discernible through the darkness, while a considerable portion of his bald, white skull could be seen in vivid contrast under his tall, black hat.

"Gee! I'm playing lucky, after all," thought Patsy, cautiously watching him. "That's my man, all right, and he's bound off. The chief was right in thinking he would make a move of some kind."

Doctor Devoll had paused to lock the door with a key taken from his pocket. He did not so much as glance toward the window under which Patsy was lying, as flat as he could make himself on the damp

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greensward. With his head and shoulders thrust forward and his hands clasped behind him, an habitual attitude when he was walking, Doctor Devoll proceeded down the gravel walk toward the rear gate.

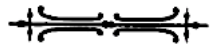
At that moment, too, Patsy caught sight of an approaching motor car in the back street.

Its lamps shone through the trees, and he could see that it was slowing down to stop at the gate.

"By Jove! I may not be as lucky as I thought," he muttered apprehensively. "If he leaves in that car it will be a racking stunt for me to keep track of it. I'll make a bid to do so, all the same."

Rising noiselessly, he now darted after the physician, stealing from tree to tree, and seeking a point from which he could get the license number of the car, and also a look at its driver. He saw him quite plainly a moment later, a powerful man wearing a slouch hat and with the collar of his overcoat turned up, partly hiding his face, a face that immediately increased Patsy's suspicion.

Doctor Devoll paused and said a few words to him; then entered the car and disappeared, for its leather curtains were on and completely hid the interior. Then the chauffeur threw in the clutch and the car moved away.



Patsy Garvan appreciated the difficulties confronting him, but he did not let them daunt him. Running diagonally across the gloomy grounds, he vaulted the low iron fence immediately after the car had passed that point, so near that he could easily read the rear number plate. He fixed the number in his mind; then darted stealthily after the car, which was entering the

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narrow court through which Chick had passed that morning.

Sprinting after it at top speed, though at a discreet distance behind and in the deeper gloom near the buildings, Patsy followed the car into Belmont Street and saw that it had turned toward a more brightly lighted business section in the distance. He could see a passing trolley car, also several slowly moving wagons, all of which was somewhat encouraging.

"They'll have to slow down in that quarter," he muttered, already breathing hard from his exertions. "That must be Main Street. It's just the time when the business

thoroughfares are blocked with homeward-bound teams. I may be able, after all, to keep my quarry in sight. I must contrive in some way to find out where this baldheaded suspect is going."

It appeared like a hopeless pursuit, nevertheless, for the motor car was speeding much more rapidly through Belmont Street and leaving Patsy farther and farther behind, in spite of his utmost exertions. Suddenly, too, it turned down a street running parallel with Main Street, evidently seeking a less-congested way.

Patsy rushed on all the while, hoping to arrive at the corner in time to keep the car in view, but he was booked for failure. He paused, panting for breath, and gazed vainly up and down the street. The only vehicle to be seen was an approaching wagon nearly a block away. Sprinting on to meet it, determined not to be thwarted, Patsy shouted to the driver:

"Did a motor car pass you half a minute ago?"

"Yes," cried the teamster. "Some one stolen it?"

"Yes." Patsy took the quickest and surest way

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to get the information he wanted. "Which way did it go?"

"Through the next street to the right, toward Main Street. You'll have to fly, kid, to catch it."

Patsy rushed on again, scarce waiting for the last, but again he was marked for failure. He arrived at the corner too late to see the car. Only the moving people and vehicles in the electric glare in Main Street, then only a block away, met his anxious gaze.

"I'll keep on, by thunder!" he muttered, instantly resuming the pursuit. "It may have been held up for a moment. It must have turned to the left, too, or it would have gone direct if intending to cross Main Street. I'll not quit, by gracious! while there's a ghost of a chance to overtake it."

Patsy's grit was good, but his quest proved vain again, and he had no alternative but to end the futile pursuit. He gazed with bitter disappointment up and down the broad thoroughfare, still walking briskly in the direction in which he knew the motor car had gone, and, though he was not then aware of it, he presently came to a crosstown street and trolley line within a stone's throw of the Waldmere Chambers.

Then, as he was about to return to the hotel to report to his chief, the gloom of disappointment was suddenly dispelled. The motor car was passing rapidly through the crosstown street. There was no mistaking it —the same number plate, the same muffled driver, the same closely curtained tonneau, yet in which Patsy caught a mere momentary glimpse of a solitary figure.

"Holy smoke! I'm in luck again," he said to himself, with a thrill of elation. "The doctor must have

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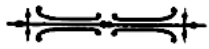

stopped somewhere and now is off in a new direction. This looks like soft walking, for fair, if they will only follow the trolley line."

An electric car going in the same direction was passing, and Patsy quickly boarded it, joining the motorman on the front platform. Slipping him a bank note, he said confidentially:

"Don't ask any questions, but help me to keep that motor car in sight. Do you get me?"

The motorman glanced at him with a look of surprise; then thrust the bank note into his pocket and grinned.

"Sure I get you," he replied. "No questions, eh? That's good enough for me, though they do say money talks. I'll do the best I can for you."

The automobile then was fifty yards in advance, but the trolley car was unobstructed and rapidly gaining speed through a street running straight toward an outskirt of the city.

"Good for you," replied Patsy. "Only a mutt would expect more."

"I'll keep it in sight, all right, unless I get the bell too often. But we're not carrying many this trip."

"Where do you run?"

"To Ashville, six miles from here. But we hit the suburbs soon; then can cut loose, if necessary. Do you know where the buzz wagon is going?"

"If I did, I would not bother you," smiled Patsy. "I have reasons for wanting to find out, if possible. Did you see the driver when he slipped in ahead of you?"

"I didn't notice him."

"You don't know who owns the car, then?"

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"I don't, but you can find out from the number."

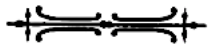
"I've got that in my head, all right," Patsy nodded. "I'll look him up later."

The motorman glanced at him again, and wondered at his interest in a car and persons whom he did not know or even their destination. He kept the trolley car moving rapidly, nevertheless, and, in spite of an occasional stop to drop or pick up passengers, he lost but little on the somber black touring car, the tail light of which gleamed like a sanguinary eye through the gloom in the near distance.

A mile run took them into the suburbs, beyond which was a stretch of almost open country, and Patsy then had the satisfaction of seeing that the trolley car was gaining on the other.

Through this open country and into a belt of woods the trolley car boomed on, and when nearly three miles out it sped over the brow of a hill, and Patsy quickly saw the lights of scattered dwellings amid clumps of trees in the distance.

“What place is that?” he inquired of the motorman.



"Only a small settlement. There's a stone quarry over the hill on the left, and the workmen live in those houses. That one off to the right is in a side road running to Lakeville, where there's pretty good fishing and gunning in the season. It's a road house run by a man named Leary. I guess that's where your buzz wagon is going. It's taking that road."

Patsy had an eye on it all the while, and saw that the time had come for him to leave the trolley car. He thanked the motorman again; then added:

"Slow down when near that road and let me drop

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off without stopping. I don't want a certain party to hear the car stop. He might think he had been followed."

"I'm on," said the motorman, laughing. "You know your business, all right."

"I ought to," smiled Patsy. "I was tutored by the best in the business."

"I guess not," said the motorman incredulously. "There's only one best—Nick Carter."

"So I have heard."

"Now's your chance. So long, and good luck."

Patsy slipped through the folding door and sprang down in the road, then darted to the shelter of a wall, while the trolley car again sped on and presently crossed the diverging road and approached the settlement beyond it.

A hundred yards to the right the lights of the road house could be seen through the trees, also the brighter glare from the motor car, then slowly approaching it.

Patsy leaped over the wall; then hurried across a strip of meadowland, quickly reaching a point from which, sheltered by some shrubbery, he could plainly see the broad driveway and front veranda of the old and somewhat weather-beaten house.

The automobile had stopped near the rise of steps. The chauffeur was springing down to

open the door. Patsy could see him distinctly in the light from the deserted veranda.

"This bald-headed doctor may have legitimate business out here," he muttered, frowning grimly at the mere thought of it and the possibility that his own desperate efforts might prove futile. "If the chief's suspicions have feet to stand on, however, it's a thousand

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to one that Doctor Devoll's mission is a very different and probably a very lawless one. It's up to me to clinch it and find out just what's doing. If he's here to confer with others, or frame up a job, I'll find some way to overhear him——Thundering guns! Am I in wrong, in dead wrong, after all?"

Patsy felt a chill of disappointment and his heart sank like lead. The door of the motor car had been opened. The solitary occupant, and Patsy could plainly see there was no other, was stepping down upon the driveway. He was an elderly man with gray hair and beard, with a compact, apparently muscular figure, clad in a plaid woolen suit

and soft felt hat—utterly unlike the long frock coat and tall black hat of the suspected physician.

"In wrong, in dead wrong!" Patsy repeated, quite crushed with sudden dismay. "That's not my quarry—not Doctor Devoll. He's too straight, too erect, too square and stocky, for Doctor Devoll. I've gone lame, for fair, as lame as an army mule. That chauffeur must have dropped the physician and picked up another passenger."

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CHAPTER XV.

PROFESSOR KARL GRAFF.

Patsy Garvan's disappointment was as deep and bitter as one could imagine. He scarce could contain it, in fact, and his first impulse was to bolt from his concealment and demand of the chauffeur where he had left Doctor David Devoll.

Brief reflection, however, convinced Patsy that that would be a fatal mistake, that the

chauffeur might be in league with the physician, after all, and that this stranger who had unexpectedly alighted from the motor car might also be one of Doctor Devoll's confederates, sent by him to his road house on a mission which he had thought it indiscreet to personally undertake.

"I'll hold my horses," thought Patsy, with hopes reviving. "There may be something doing, after all, that will set me right. I'll wait and see. He seems to be giving that driver important instructions."

The two men had been talking quietly in the driveway, too low for Patsy to hear so much as a single word, but the elderly man now turned abruptly up the steps and peered into the hall for a moment, and then entered the house.

The chauffeur closed the door of the car, then turned and shot a searching glance in each direction, causing Patsy to crouch lower in his concealment.

Presently, approaching the corner, the driver gazed toward the rear of the house, then started abruptly

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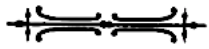
and walked completely around it, returning to the same corner and taking a position from which he could continue to watch the side windows, also the driveway leading to the stable yard, on that side of the house nearest to Patsy.

It was a situation that now precluded any move on Patsy's part. To approach any of the windows, or even to steal away and seek an advantage elsewhere, was out of the question. Detection would be inevitable. He had no alternative but to lie low.

Minutes passed, and the chauffeur continued to wait and watch, scarcely stirring from his position—all of which convinced Patsy that his suspicions were correct, that the elderly man was holding a conference with some one and that the chauffeur was guarding against spies outside.



That he was right appeared in what occurred when the elderly man entered the house. He met no one in the hall, save an aged black cat, and he quickly entered a side room, in which a solitary man was waiting with an empty whisky glass on the table near which he was seated.

He was a tall man, close upon forty, very well clad, having dark eyes and complexion, but a rather weak cast of features. He was smooth-shaven. A combination false mustache and beard had been removed and was lying on the table. He looked up when the other entered, saying a bit irritably:

"Well, you're here, Graff, at last. What kept you? I've been waiting half an hour."

"But not idle!"

Graff spoke with a fiery gleam leaping up in his eyes. He was the same Professor Graff, chemist, with

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an office and a laboratory in the Waldmere Chambers, who had appeared in the corridor soon after the corpse of Gaston Todd was

found, and who had blandly asserted, when questioned by Nick Carter, that he was not a physician and that his opinion regarding the fatality would be worthless.

There was no blandness in his low voice just then, however, nor any such quality.

"But not idle!" he repeated, with a fierce, sibilant hiss, pointing to the whisky glass and then dashing it to atoms in the fireplace. "You cut that out, Dorson, while doing business with me. Booze is a damned bad partner. It has brought you where you are and made you my tool. Cut it out—entirely! Obey me, Dorson, or—God help you!"

A resentful scowl appeared on Dorson's face, which was not without signs of past dissipation, but the frown vanished quickly under the fiery rebuke of his companion. He pulled himself up, nevertheless, and said sullenly:

"I'm not so sure, Graff, that I'll consent to be your tool."

"Not consent?" Professor Graff sneered icily. "What are you saying? You have consented."

"I can revoke— —"

"Not with me!"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm not so sure."

"I am." Graff's voice was cold, but his eyes were like balls of fire. "There will be no revocation. You will not withdraw from our compact."

"What's to prevent me?"

"Fear. If not fear—this."

Professor Graff thrust his hand into his pocket and

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drew a singular weapon. It resembled an automatic revolver, with a cylinderlike device attached to the barrel. There was no trigger, however, but only a small, round button, on which the finger of the chemist lightly rested. He displayed the weapon in his hand, his lips parting with a mocking

smile, while Dorson started slightly and gazed at it incredulously.

“This will, if necessary, be our arbiter,” Graff sneered. “I can end you with it in the hundredth part of a second.”

“You would not dare,” gasped Dorson. “You would bring Leary and the bartender. You would be caught red-handed.”

“There would be no red hand, no bloodshed, no sound,” Graff retorted. “It makes no noise, discharges no bullet. But the effect is no less deadly. I could leave you here as if you had fallen lifeless from your chair, or as if—perdition! Are you still doubtful? You shall see.”

There was something even more terrible in the aspect of this man at that moment than in his threatening words. He swung around quickly and quietly opened the door. The black cat he had seen in the hall still was there. He stepped out and seized the animal, then returned and tossed him to a corner of the room, closing the door.

The black cat was gazing with dilated yellow eyes at the lowering chemist, as if surprised at such extraordinary treatment.

“Watch!” Graff snapped fiercely, with one swift glance at his horrified companion.

He extended his right hand and the strange weapon. His piercing gaze leaped over the glistening barrel.

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His finger pressed the round button in the cylinder. There was a quick, explosive puff, yet hardly audible, but the black cat dropped in a crumpled heap, with his yellow eyes gone dim and glassy. The animal was dead, as crimp and shriveled as if the hot breath of a withering blight had passed over him.

Dorson caught his breath convulsively and tried to speak, but his voice seemed to die in his throat.

Professor Graff kicked the lifeless cat farther into the corner, then sat down directly opposite his ghastly companion, as unconcerned as if nothing had transpired. He

replaced the mysterious weapon in his pocket, saying coldly, yet pointedly:

"It is a very handy thing to have when circumstances make it necessary."

"It is devilish!" Dorson found his voice, shuddering, and wiped the sweat from his brow. "It is fiendish!"

"But convincing?" queried Graff, with searching scrutiny.

"Convincing—yes!" Dorson shuddered again. "Enough has been done and said, but I wish I never had seen you, never conspired with you."

"But, having done so, there can be no revocation, no retreat," Graff said sternly. "I have seen signs of it, Dorson, and I have to convince you."

"Enough has been done and said," Dorson repeated, pulling himself together.

"Besides, there are other reasons," Graff added. "We are up against a tough proposition, one that is hourly becoming

more threatening; but of that a little later. We'll get right down to business."

"The windows——"

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"Fear nothing. Toby Monk is watching them."

"The door——"

"None can approach it unheard. I have the ears of a rat."

"Be quick, then," said Dorson more calmly. "The sooner we leave here, Graff, the better."

"Your identity has not been discovered?" questioned the chemist quickly.

"No, no, nothing of that kind. It is not even suspected."

"Nor will I be seen," Graff said confidently. "I'll make sure of that, and have guarded against other contingencies. Toby is disguised. His car bears a false number. None will learn of our rendezvous, nor even suspect it. Now, Dorson, have you brought the invitations?"

"Yes, two of them," said Dorson, producing two sealed envelopes and placing them on the table.

"Good!" Graff seized them and put them in his pocket. "From whom did you get them?"

"I stole them from those with which my aunt, Mrs. Thurlow, was supplied to dispose of," replied Dorson. "She is one of the sponsors for the affair, and that was the only way to get them without disclosing the names of the persons who are to use them. No one will be admitted without a card bearing his name. It's an exclusive affair. Fictitious names can be inscribed on these."

"Capital!" Graff nodded, smiling maliciously. "What if your aunt misses them?"

"She will think she mislaid them, and can easily explain to the managers. Her word is good."

"None better," Graff dryly admitted.

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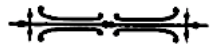
"What more must be done?" Dorson questioned.



"Take my final instructions." Professor Graff drew nearer the table and fixed his penetrating eyes on those of his confederate. "You are in the social swim, Dorson, and can execute them without incurring the slightest suspicion."

"That was the agreement. You promised that no harm should come to me."

"None will. Remember, too, that I promised you ten thousand dollars for your share of the plunder. That will more than pay your debts and set you on your feet. It's not a bad reward, Dorson, for a mere bit of safe and important work."

"That's the only inducement." Dorson's face was haggard and clouded. "I'll chuck everything, honor and self-respect, in order to square myself. But what is this safe and important work? What must I do?"

Professor Graff took from his pocket a small celluloid box with a close-fitting cover. He caressed it fondly for a moment, with an abnormal gleam and glitter in his narrow

eyes, then leaned forward and said impulsively:

"Listen! You are to take this, but do not for your life venture to open it before the fateful moment arrives. The box is air-tight, but its cover can be easily removed. It contains only a lady's handkerchief."

"What am I to do with it?" Dorson asked, gazing curiously at the smooth white box.

"Take it to the reception," Graff directed. "You are familiar with the ballroom and its surroundings, with the row of French windows that open upon the west balcony roof near the porte-cochère."

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"Yes, yes, of course," Dorson said impatiently. "I know all that."

"Note me, then," Graff continued. "I will be at the ball to give you a signal. We must not be seen together, however, nor in any way betray that we are acquainted."

"Well?"

"Upon getting my signal, which you will receive at an opportune moment when she is alone, you must immediately join Mrs. Mortimer Thurlow, at the same time stealthily opening the box and removing the handkerchief."

"And then?"

"Give it to her at once, without a moment's delay, and remark she dropped it," said Graff. "She will infer that it is her own. If not, she will at least raise it toward her face to examine it. Step back a little, meantime, covering your nostrils, that you may inhale no appreciable quantity of that with which the handkerchief is impregnated."

"What's the stuff?" growled Dorson, brows knitting.

"Do not be curious." Professor Graff spoke with a frown. "I have confederates, but to none do I confide my secrets. Take my instructions—and obey them."

"Well, what more?"

"Watch the woman," Graff continued. "Only her eyes will change perceptibly. A fixed

expression will immediately appear, and her pupils will contract to mere pin points. Take her arm, then, and lead her out through the nearest French window."

"Suppose she refuses to go, or——"

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"She will not refuse or do anything else," Graff interrupted. "She will go willingly and without a word or a subsequent recollection of what occurs. Place her in the nearest chair on the balcony. Get the handkerchief and return it to the box, then hasten to the ballroom and go after a glass of water. You can afterward assert that she sent you for it and said she felt faint. She will admit it, for she will remember nothing and cannot consistently deny it."

"But the pearls?" Dorson questioned, eyes glowing. "What of the rope of pearls?"

"There will be no rope of pearls." Graff's teeth met with a vicious snap. "All that must be done can be done in a single minute. When help comes, when you return, when the woman revives, though all occurs within

a minute, there will be no rope of pearls. It will have been stolen—mysteriously stolen."

"But I may be suspected," argued Dorson.

"Absurd! You could not possibly steal and dispose of it under the seeming conditions. The woman will believe she was faint only for a moment. She will not be sure it was then that she lost the pearls. She is your aunt, moreover, and would refuse to suspect you."

"But your infernal stuff may fail to work," Dorson suggested.

"It will not fail. It cannot fail." Graff spoke with convincing assurance. "I have tested it upon no less than four subjects, Dorson, to make sure of success in this undertaking. There is nothing for you to fear, absolutely nothing."

"I'll tackle it, then, and take the chance." Dorson

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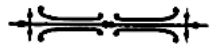
abruptly declared, thrusting the celluloid box into his pocket. "Is there anything more?"



Professor Graff hesitated for a moment, then shook his head.

“No, nothing for us to discuss,” he replied.

“But you mentioned a tough proposition that you would speak of presently. What did you mean by that?” Dorson demanded suspiciously.

“Only that an unexpected force is at work against us, one that many would fear, and with which few could successfully cope.” Graff’s voice took on a more virulent intensity. “But I do not fear. I can oppose and overcome it. My agents are already at work. I have given warning, too, as I have warned you, and if pressed too hard, if threats prove futile, if the peril becomes really alarming—well, you see! You have seen for yourself, Dorson, how I can overcome it. There is always a way—always a way.”

Graff had swung around in his chair and was pointing to the lifeless black form in the corner.

Dorson gazed at him, at his extended hand and quivering fingers, at his drawn, bearded face, indescribably malevolent, and with that terrible abnormal gleam and glitter in his frowning eyes, and Dorson felt, with blood chilled and flesh gone cold and clammy, that he was gazing at a madman or a devil incarnate.

"Yes, yes, I have seen enough, Graff, more than enough," he said hoarsely, lips twitching. "What more need be said?"

"Nothing more." Professor Graff turned coldly calm again. "You have my instructions. I know you

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will obey them. We must not meet again until after the trick has been turned, and then only secretly."

"That suits me. Let's be moving."

"How did you come out here?"

"In a trolley car."

"You may return part way with me. I'll drop you before entering town. Resume your

disguise, then see whether the hall and veranda are deserted."

Dorson arose and hastened to obey. He returned in a few seconds, saying quietly:

"Come on. There's no one around."

There was one still around, nevertheless, still lying low amid the rank grass and shrubbery that had served to conceal him.

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CHAPTER XVI.
VAIN INQUIRIES.

Patsy Garvan had been waiting and watching about fifteen minutes, the circumstances precluding any further action, when he saw the two men come out of the road house.

They hurried down the steps and entered the motor car. Toby Monk, the chauffeur, also saw them, and ran to resume his seat at the wheel. They were away within half a minute, departing with very significant haste and returning to Madison at a rate of speed

precluding pursuit, but leaving Patsy gazing with an ominous frown after the rear red light till it vanished in the distance.

"That does settle it," he muttered grimly. "I've lost track of them for a time, at least, in spite of anything I can do. But I've got the number of that car, all right, and I'll identify them later as sure as there's juice in a lemon. I can find out, perhaps, by inquiring of some one in the house. The third man may hang out there, however, and I might get in wrong. I think I can turn the trick at that, without incurring suspicion," he added to himself after a moment's thought. "I'll take the chance, by gracious, let come what may."

Leaving his concealment, he walked out to the driveway, where, having made sure there were no observers, he threw himself on one side in the sand and dirt and ground the palm of his right hand into the gravel,

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a performance that might cause one to wonder what advantage could be derived.

Patsy knew, however, and he immediately arose and entered the road house. Though the hall still was unoccupied, he could hear the voices of men in the rear rooms, also the clinking of glasses, and he rightly inferred that there was a public bar in one of the rooms. He hastened thither and entered, with a pretense of brushing his soiled garments and with an indignant frown on his face.

"Say!" he exclaimed, approaching a bar on one side of the room. "Who are the ginks that just left here in a buzz wagon?"

Three men were playing cards at a table in one corner, evidently quarry workmen from the near settlement, each with a mug of ale at his elbow. Back of the bar stood a burly man in his shirt sleeves, with a much-bloated and pimply face, the redeeming feature of which was an expression of habitual good nature. He gazed at Patsy and laughed, replying to his impetuous question, but the three card players merely glanced at him.

"Buzz wagon, eh?" he said huskily. "I didn't know one was here."

"Well there was."

"Funny I didn't hear it."

"I came near feeling it, all right," grumbled Patsy, displaying his soiled hand. "It came out to the road as if shot from a gun. It nearly ran over me. I fell down while dodging it, as you see, but I reckon I was lucky to get away with that. You don't know them, eh?"

"Mebbe 'twas the bloke who rang for the booze,

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Jim," suggested one of the players, looking up. "Have you forgotten him, Leary?"

"The man who runs the house," thought Patsy; then, as if the identity of the visitors was of no great consequence, he said agreeably: "I'll have a mug of ale. See what these gents will have and get in yourself."

The invitation was readily accepted by all, and Patsy paid willingly, thus paving the way for further inquiries.

“I’m going to Madison,” he said, in reply to a question. “I came from Ashville on the trolley line. How soon can I hit another?”

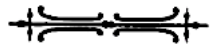
“Twelve minutes, if she shows up on time,” said Leary, glancing at a nickel watch. “It might have been the man in the side room. I’ll have a look.”

“Twelve minutes, eh?” said Patsy, more quickly drinking his ale when Leary swaggered out from the bar and into the hall. “That’s not long. I don’t want to miss it.”

He added the last to warrant his following the burly proprietor, who obviously was so void of distrust that Patsy very soon decided that none of these men had had any intercourse with the two visitors and very probably knew neither of them.

“No danger of missing it,” replied Leary, as they approached the side room. “The motorman always stops on the corner and rings his gong. He often picks up a bunch from here.”

“I see,” returned Patsy pleasantly. “I needn’t be in any rush, then.”



"No rush at all."

"We'll have time for another drink?"

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"Sure thing. Time enough for——Huh, I'm blessed if Kelly wasn't right! The bloke has gone."

Leary had knocked on the door, and then opened it. He entered while speaking, Patsy following, and again asking carelessly:

"Didn't you know the man? Was he a stranger here?"

"Sure he was." Leary turned and gazed at him. "I didn't know him from a hole in the wall. He must have known this room was for customers, though, for he nailed it and rang for a drink."

"He must have been here before, then, or he wouldn't have known it," said Patsy.

"That's right, too." Leary nodded. "I brought him the booze he ordered, and then he said he wanted to wait for a friend and have a private talk with him. He chucked me a buck for the booze and told me to keep the

change. That looked good to me and like more coming, so I told him he could stay as long as he liked, and would not be interrupted."

"I see," said Patsy, now sure that Leary was telling him the truth. "His friend came, all right, and they went away together. There were three in the car when——"

"But where's the booze glass?" cried Leary, who now had turned toward the table. "That ought to be here. They would not steal a whisky glass, unless——"

"Stop a bit!" Patsy interrupted. "It was thrown into the fireplace. Here are pieces of it, and—holy smoke! This cat is dead!"

Patsy had caught sight of it a moment before, and he at first had thought the animal was asleep. A second

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look, however, evoked the last startling exclamation and brought Leary to his knees near his lifeless pet.

“Good God! What’s the meaning of this?” he growled, with a scowl, convincing Patsy of his sincerity. “Dead as an iron bolt! What’s the meaning of it?”

“Has the cat been sick?” Patsy inquired.

“Sick—no!” cried Leary. “There’s been nothing the matter with him. He was getting a bit old, but was well enough. Poor old Gimblet!” Leary added, with genuine feeling.

“Was he in this room when you were here?” asked Patsy.

“No. He was asleep in the hall.”

“He may have wandered in here.”

“How could he? The door was closed.”

“H’m, is that so?” Patsy murmured, as puzzled as the other and much more suspicious.

“He’s dead, all right, as a smelt.” Leary now turned the animal over. “But I’ll be hanged if I can see why the booze glass was smashed or why the cat should have died. Something must have killed him. Say, you

don't s'pose they gave him poison in that glass, then smashed it, do you?" he added, quickly turning to Patsy. "If I thought that, I'd go after those mongrels with a gun, by thunder, and stick till I got them!"

This possible fate was suggested to Leary by a momentary expression that had passed over Patsy's face. He had detected a peculiar, shriveled appearance in the fur on the cat's breast and neck, and it instantly recalled to his mind what his chief had said

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concerning the man found dead in the Waldmere Chambers two days before.

Patsy concealed his immediate misgivings, however, but pretended to be impressed with Leary's suggestions.

"That may explain it, Mr. Leary, if they had any reason for wanting to kill the cat," he replied. "The fellow you saw probably did not do it. More likely the old man was the one who killed him."

"What old man?" Leary demanded, with a vengeful glare in his eyes.

“The one I saw in the motor car,” said Patsy, now aiming only to identify him, if possible. “He’s quite a stocky man, with gray hair and whiskers. He wore a plaid suit and soft felt hat. His chauffeur was bigger and broader, with dark hair and a pointed beard. I got a look at them when they flew by me.”

“I dunno any such men,” Leary earnestly protested. “The whole business beats me to a frazzle.”

“It does seem a bit strange,” Patsy allowed. “You’ll find out later, perhaps. I reckon I’ll be getting a move on, as I don’t want to miss that car. I’m sorry you have lost the cat. I’ll drop in again, when I’m returning to Ashville.”

“All right, kid,” said Leary, brightening up and following Patsy to the door. “If you see those two blokes again, do me a favor, will you?”

“What’s that, Mr. Leary?”

“Get the truth out of them, if you have to get it with a club.”

"I will," Patsy promptly assured him. "Take it from me, Mr. Leary, I'll get it—and all there is to it."

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"Good for you!" Leary shouted after him heartily.

For Patsy already was hastening toward the road leading out to the trolley line, something like a hundred yards away. He had seen plainly that he could learn nothing more at the road house. The negative reports he had obtained, however, together with the startling discovery he had made, convinced him that his mission had not been a futile one.

"Leary's all right," he said to himself while walking on rapidly. "He told me all he knows and gave it to me straight. That rendezvous had been agreed upon and the road house selected for a safe place. But who are they and what came off in there? Why was the whisky glass broken and the cat killed? In view of all of the circumstances, by Jove, there's a mighty strong similarity between that fatality and

the killing of Gaston Todd. It becomes doubly important now to trace and identify these rascals, and I reckon I'm in a fair way to accomplish it. All this, moreover, seems to put Doctor Devoll in the background. That is, if I size it all up correctly. I'll hike back to the Wilton House, by Jove, and report to the chief."

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CHAPTER XVII.
CRAFT AND FORESIGHT.

Nick Carter's strong, clean-cut face took on a more serious expression while he listened. It was half past eight when Patsy returned, just as Nick was about leaving the Wilton House, and only half an hour after Chick set forth to search the apartments of Gaston Todd.

"That's all, chief," said Patsy, when ending his report. "As far as I can see, it lets Doctor Devoll out of the circle of suspicion and rings in another, no less than three, in fact—the chauffeur, his elderly passenger, and the

man he met at the road house. For I'll wager my pile, chief, that the chauffeur knew there was something doing and was acting as a sentinel."

"Are you absolutely sure that the elderly passenger was not Doctor Devoll?" Nick inquired.

"Reasonably sure, chief, at least," said Patsy confidently. "He is too solid and compact for Devoll, more erect and with broader shoulders. Devoll is somewhat bowed and very slim. He looks like a string bean."

"He may have disguised himself while in the motor car," Nick suggested.

"I don't think so," Patsy quickly objected. "He would hardly have covered all of the features mentioned. Besides, I could see the interior of the car distinctly when the door was open, and I would have seen his discarded hat and garments."

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"That does seem probable," Carter thoughtfully admitted. "Don't you overlook one fact, however?"

"What's that, chief?"

"That you saw Doctor Devoll leave the hospital and ride away with the chauffeur. You could not then have been mistaken as to the physician's identity, and the circumstances convince me that he is in some way associated with the two men who met in the road house."

"I think so, too, chief, as far as that goes," said Patsy.

"It appears probable, too, that the chauffeur is one of the gang," Carter added. "Also that we are up against more of a gang than I have suspected. I at first was inclined to attribute the many mysterious robberies here, as well as the killing of Gaston Todd, to a single exceedingly crafty and accomplished crook. I now believe, however, that he is the chief director of a gang, instead of at work alone."

"That must be right, too," nodded Patsy. "There's no getting around it."

"But here's another point," said Carter. "The mysterious killing of Leary's cat, whatever the motive of it, and the similar strangeness

in connection with the murder of Todd denote that both were committed by the same man or some of his gang."

"That's how I size it up."

"You are sure, however, that neither of the men at the road house was Doctor Devoll," Nick continued. "I may in that case be mistaken in thinking he is the man behind the gun, the evil genius back of the whole business. There may be another, and Doctor Devoll only indirectly associated with him."

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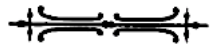
"You mean the elderly man who took Doctor Devoll's place in the motor car?"

"Exactly."

"Devoll may have sent him out to the road house to meet that other fellow," Patsy suggested.

"Possibly," said Nick. "It is more probable, however, that Devoll informed him of my visit this afternoon and of the threats I made. The other may have become alarmed and set about thwarting my designs. All this appears the more probable, Patsy, because that



threatening anonymous letter and all these very, significant episodes have followed so quickly after my call on Doctor Devoll."

"Right again, chief, as sure as I'm a foot high," Patsy declared. "It's long odds, too, that the road-house conference was held only to frame up a job on you."

"I'm not so sure of that," his chief replied. "They may have met to plan the theft of Mrs. Mortimer Thurlow's pearls or to alter plans made before the threatening letter was sent to me."

"Mebbe so," Patsy allowed. "It's a pity I couldn't overhear the discussion and see what came off."

"We'll make use of what you have discovered, not mourn over what was impossible," said Carter dryly. "We must now contrive to identify those three men. All wore beards, you say?"

"Yes."

"Possibly, then, all were disguised. You have the number of the motor car, however, and that may help, barring trickery of some kind.

Such crafty rascals as these don't often let a license number expose

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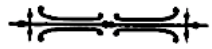
them. There is a possibility, nevertheless, that they overlooked it."

"The chance is worth taking."

"Surely. You go over to the garage and see what you can learn," Carter directed, rising and taking his hat. "I have other business in the meantime, and will return about ten o'clock. Chick then will have shown up perhaps and have something to report. Get your information on the quiet, mind you."

"Trust me for that, chief," said Patsy, as they were leaving the room together.

Nick Carter's other business, or part of it, consisted of keeping a promise he had made the previous morning. He called at the city prison, confiding his identity and mission to the warden, and was promptly accorded an interview with Frank Paulding in the warden's private office.



Nick did not expect, however, that Paulding would have any information to impart. He called on him only because of his promise and to say a few words of encouragement to the suspected man, also to direct him to maintain the negative position he had taken.

"Oh, I'll continue to do so, Mr. Carter, as I agreed with you yesterday morning," Paulding assured him. "It's a bitter pill for an innocent man to swallow, but I'll not weaken. I'll stick, sir, as long as I know you are working for me."

"You may depend upon that," the detective said simply.

"Thank Heaven, too, there is one rift in the clouds," Paulding added.

"What is that?"

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"A letter from Edna Thurlow. It came this morning. She expresses her sympathy for me, her belief that I am a victim of circumstances, and assures me of her absolute faith in my innocence."

"Good for her!" said Carter, smiling. "It's very significant, too."

"Significant?"

"Surely," laughed the detective. "A girl writes like that only to one she loves. You were not quite sure of it, you remember. This ought to convince you and really make it worth while to be suspected."

"I'm not sure but it does," replied Paulding, brightening up. "I do regret one restriction, however, that you have imposed on me. It's a thorn in my flesh."

"I know it," said the detective tersely.

"You know it? How the deuce can you know it? You don't know to what restriction I refer."

"Oh, yes, I do." Nick laughed again. "Though not a lover, I know how lovers feel. You itch to relieve Miss Thurlow's anxiety by telling her of our relations."

"By Jove, you're a keen cuss, Carter!" Paulding declared, now joining in the detective's laugh. "You've called the turn,

all right, but itch doesn't express it. Really, I ache to do so."

"Well, stop aching," Nick said dryly, rising to go. "I shall see Miss Thurlow this evening, and will tell her all that she needs to know."

"See her!" Paulding sprang up, eyes glowing. "Oh, I say, then——"

"No, no, don't say it," the detective cut in with affected alarm. "I'll not take any love messages to her. I draw the line at that. I have passed that

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stage, you know, and would only make an awful mess of it, to say nothing of making a fool of myself. I will tell her enough, Paulding, however; so rest easy with that until I can see you again."

Nick left him with a much lighter heart than when he had entered, which was what he chiefly desired, but his mission to the Thurlow residence was of greater importance.

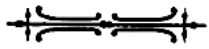
It was nine o'clock when he arrived at the house, one of the most costly and beautiful dwellings in Madison. He was admitted by an elderly butler, who invited him to a seat in a handsomely furnished reception room.

Nick had given him a card on which he had written only his first name, stating that he called on important business, and he had been waiting only a few moments when a graceful, strikingly pretty girl in an evening gown joined him, still with the card in her hand.

"Good evening," she said agreeably, with an inquiring look in her blue eyes. "I am Miss Thurlow, Mr. Nicholas, but I infer that your business is with my mother. She has gone up to her room, but I have sent for her to come down. Your name does not suggest any business which——"

"It might, perhaps, if I had written my full name—Nicholas Carter," he interposed, bowing and smiling.

"Nicholas Carter!" gasped Edna, staring at him. "Not the famous New York detective?"



"Well, yes, thanking you for the complimentary adjective."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Edna amazedly. "Are

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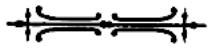
you a wizard? Do you ride on the wind? How did you get here so quickly?"

"Get here?" queried Carter, though he at once guessed the truth. "You were expecting me then?"

"Well, not so quickly, of course," said the girl. "But I telegraphed to you no less than an hour ago, asking you to come immediately to Madison. I did not suppose you could cover hundreds of miles in as many seconds. I thought when the bell rang that you had wired back, and this name on the card meant nothing to me. Really, Mr. Carter, I am quite mystified."

Nick Carter laughed pleasantly, and replied:

"I will presently explain. Why, may I ask, did you send for me to come to Madison?"



"I want you to investigate a very mysterious murder," Edna now earnestly explained. "A very dear friend of mine is suspected and is under arrest. I am sure he is innocent, however, absolutely sure; but I can see no way to prove it. I want you to find a way. Money is no object, Mr. Carter, for he is very dear to me and— —"

"Pardon." Nick checked her more gravely. "It would be unkind for me to leave you in the dark and let you continue to speak so feelingly. I know all about your friend. I left him only a few minutes ago. Like you, too, I know that he is innocent. I already am at work to prove it, Miss Thurlow, and Paulding has from the first been acting under my instructions."

It would be impossible to describe the expression of astonishment on Edna Thurlow's pretty face upon hearing these disclosures, but before she could collect

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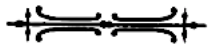
herself and reply a stately, very handsome, and distinguished-looking woman entered from the hall, saying quite graciously:



“What was that I heard? Mr. Paulding acting under your instructions, sir?”

Carter turned and bowed, while Edna immediately introduced her mother, hastily informing her of the detective’s identity and his startling statements. The detective then accepted an invitation to accompany them to the library, where he not only dispelled their perplexity, but also greatly relieved their anxiety by telling them of his relations with Paulding and, in a strictly confidential way, the nature of his mission.

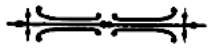
“As a matter of fact, however, I have called to see you on other business, Mrs. Thurlow,” he said a little later. “It is your intention, I have heard, to attend the reception ball of the National Guards to-morrow evening.”

“Yes, indeed, both of us,” Mrs. Thurlow replied. “I am one of the sponsors and the director of the ladies’ reception committee.”

“Is it to be quite an elaborate affair?”

“Yes, Mr. Carter, quite so.”

“I understand that you own a very valuable rope of pearls, which you intend wearing.”



"Yes, surely." Mrs. Thurlow regarded him with a look of surprise. "When would I wear it, if not on such an occasion? I wonder at your having heard of my pearls, however."

"I have heard something more," Carter informed her. "I cannot honorably conceal the fact from you, property of such value being in jeopardy, but I hope

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you will consent to act upon my advice and instructions."

"In jeopardy?" Mrs. Thurlow questioned, turning pale. "What do you mean, Mr. Carter?"

"I mean, Mrs. Thurlow, that an attempt will be made to steal them."

"Good heavens!" gasped Edna. "How shocking, mamma!"

"Steal them?" Mrs. Thurlow smiled expressively. "Well, well, that can be easily prevented. I will not wear them."

"I thought you would say so," Nick replied. "On the contrary, however, I want you to

wear them and to conduct yourself precisely as if you knew nothing about the danger, which I felt constrained to disclose. Let me tell you the circumstances."

He then proceeded to do so, showing her the anonymous letter, and then interrogating her about nearly every feature of the complicated case. His inquiries proved vain, however, for both Mrs. Thurlow and her daughter were entirely in the dark as to the identity and motives of the criminals involved.

"But why, Mr. Carter, having informed me of the danger, do you want me to wear the pearls?" Mrs. Thurlow inquired. "That will be indiscreet, at least."

"Less so than you suppose," the detective assured her. "I will take every possible precaution to protect them and prevent the theft. Your wearing them, however, will give me an opportunity to identify and capture these miscreants."

"Ah, I see!" Mrs. Thurlow exclaimed. "But do you think you can accomplish it?"

"I am very sure of it."

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"Well, to tell the truth, Mr. Carter, I have great confidence in you," Mrs. Thurlow said earnestly. "Your frankness in this matter, moreover, when you could have had what you ask by leaving me in ignorance, constrains me to take the risk. It would be a benefit to rid this community of the knaves with which it long has been infested, and I'll take the chance and do my part. I will wear the rope of pearls, Mr. Carter."

"Good for you, mamma!" said Edna, with some enthusiasm. "I'll wager that Mr. Carter will make good."

Nick smiled and thanked her; then added more seriously:

"But you must conduct yourselves, both of you, precisely as if ignorant of the circumstances. Do not mention them to any person or the fact that I have called here. Much may depend upon your doing exactly what I direct."

"You may rely upon us to do so," Mrs. Thurlow assured him.

"Very good," said the detective. "Tell me, now, who is to be your escort."

"My nephew, John Dorson."

"Jack will look after both of us, Mr. Carter, owing to Mr. Paulding's dreadful predicament," Edna added.

"My instructions include him also," Nick said, though not then dreaming the actual need of it. "Do not confide anything to Mr. Dorson. He might be so vigilant and attentive to you, Mrs. Thurlow, that the crooks would not attempt the theft. That would, of course, preclude my catching them."

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"We will be governed accordingly," Mrs. Thurlow again assured him.

Nick lingered only to add a few minor instructions. It was after eleven o'clock when he returned to the Wilton House, now feeling sure that he would outwit the unknown crooks in any game they might

attempt to play and that more definite discoveries concerning them would speedily be made.

The detective had further proof of their craft and sagacity, however, upon entering his suite. For he found Patsy Garvan waiting for him, who had learned that the automobile having the State license number he had looked up was owned by one of the leading bankers in the State, who dwelt more than a hundred miles from Madison.

“It could not have been his car that I saw,” declared Patsy, after reporting the facts. “That’s a cinch, chief, and it admits of only one conclusion. That chauffeur had false number plates, or had altered his own in some way.”

Nick Carter’s brows knitted ominously, but he did not comment upon this further evidence of knavish foresight. Instead, he asked a bit abruptly:

“Have you seen Chick?”

“Not yet,” said Patsy. “He has not returned.”

“That looks bad, too.” Nick spoke with a growl. “It ought not to have taken him three hours to search Todd’s apartments. It could have been done in half that time. Can it be that anything has gone wrong there also and that these rascals——Get your hat, Patsy,” he abruptly digressed. “Get a move on and go with me. We’ll have a look at Todd’s apartments.”

It was nearly twelve o’clock when, having aroused

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the night manager of the Studley, they obtained admission to the rooms of the murdered man and switched on the electric light. The scene that met their gaze brought a horrified ejaculation from the manager and a cry of dismay from Patsy Garvan.

Chick was lying where he had fallen, with his arms extended, his right sleeve drawn up a little, and with his face upturned in the bright light, as ghastly white as the face of a dead man.

The rooms were in shocking disorder. A roll-top desk had been broken open and looted from top to bottom. Table drawers, those of a bureau and chiffonier, a trunk in the wardrobe closet—the contents of all had been pulled out and scattered broadcast over the floor. From end to end, in fact, the apartments had been thoroughly searched.

"By thunder, this was not Chick's work!" cried Carter, with features turning flinty. "We have been balked again, balked by this gang of infernal——What do you say, Patsy? He's not dead, surely! I can see that plainly."

Patsy then was crouching on the floor beside the prostrate detective.

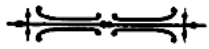
CHAPTER XVIII.
NICK DECLARES HIMSELF.

Nick Carter was right as to Chick's condition. He had seen at a glance that he was not dead. He quickly noticed, too, the sleeve drawn up above his right wrist, exposing part of the arm, and he immediately joined Patsy and pointed to a tiny puncture in the white skin.

"He has been drugged," said he, with an indignant ring in his subdued voice. "That's the prick of a hypodermic needle."

"Surely," muttered Patsy. "But how did they contrive to get him and the——"

"Don't ask me how. It's useless to speculate," Carter interrupted. "They shall pay dear for it, nevertheless, take my word for that. Is there a physician in the house, Mr. Vernon?" he added, turning to the astonished manager.



"Yes, there is," was the hasty reply. "Doctor Percy. His suite is on this floor."

"Bring him as quickly as possible," the detective directed. "Tell him that stimulants will be needed to counteract a drug, but don't create a stir or cause any excitement. There is no occasion to arouse the house. He soon can revive this man."

Carter had no doubt of it after a hasty examination, and in a very few minutes Doctor Percy came in and set to work over the unconscious detective, applying such restoratives as the case seemed to require.

In the meantime, with Patsy at his elbow, Nick made a thorough inspection of the several rooms. He found a window in the bedroom unlocked, and on the platform of the fire escape he discovered, with the help of his search light, the faint tracks left by the masked man whom Chick had encountered about three hours before.

"How it was done, Patsy, now is quite obvious," Carter said grimly. "Some one, probably more than one, was here in

advance of Carter or entered about the same time. Chick was caught unawares, I think, and overcome by the rascals."

"But how could they have anticipated his visit?" questioned Patsy perplexedly.

"They did not," Nick replied. "They did, however, anticipate something else."

"What was that?"

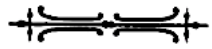
"That I would search these rooms, Patsy, and the same farsighted rascal who sent me the anonymous letter undertook to get in his work ahead of me."

"By Jove, I guess that's right, chief."

"He knew that I would seek for any evidence that Todd might have left here, and he sent one or more of his gang to prevent me from getting it. They have succeeded, too, if Todd really left anything, for they have cleaned up completely."

"Gee whiz! I should say so," Patsy agreed. "They didn't miss nook or corner."

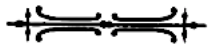
"It was the work of the same gang, but other members of it than you saw at the road



house," Carter added. "Their chief, or the director of these various steps, is certainly an infernally keen and farsighted knave. He not only discovered my identity and presence in Madison, but also has contrived to anticipate and balk my every important move. But I'll finally get him and every mother's son of them. We'll not rest until we have run down the entire gang and——Ah, by Jove, that was Chick's voice."

They had been briefly talking in the bedroom, from which both hastened upon hearing the familiar voice, and they found Chick propped up against a chair, with his eyes open. He was responding rapidly to the stimulants given him, and he soon was able to clearly describe his encounter with the masked man.

Not until the following morning, however, being averse to discussing his suspicions in the presence of Vernon and the physician, and knowing that no further steps could be taken that night, did Carter express his views on the subject. He then was at breakfast with



Patsy and Chick, the latter having entirely recovered from the effects of the drug.

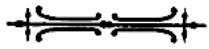
“Your sudden collapse, Chick, and the sensations preceding it admit of only one explanation,” said Carter. “Your assailant was provided with a powerful storage battery, so ingeniously contrived and carried on his person that he could impart an overwhelming shock to an antagonist without incurring danger from the electric current.”

“That’s how I size it up,” Chick agreed. “The sensations were very convincing.”

“It could be accomplished with an ingenious arrangement of wires,” Carter added. “Having knocked you out, so to speak, and knowing you soon would throw off the effects of the brief shock, he immediately

drugged you with a hypodermic injection, and then proceeded to deliberately do what I had sent you there to accomplish.”

“He got the best of me, all right,” Chick admitted.



"All this is very significant, however," Carter said more earnestly. "The ingenuity displayed, this use of electricity, of drugs, of strange poisonous gas, with a knowledge how it can be administered so as to mysteriously cause death, as in Todd's case, together with the similar circumstances in the remarkable robberies committed here, also in the cases of the four girls found unconscious in the hospital grounds—all evince a profound knowledge of such things, that of the one man by whom all of these crimes were devised and directed."

"I agree with you," Chick nodded, laying aside his napkin. "Only one man would probably be so well informed and knavishly original."

"He is either a criminal genius or a madman whose perverted mind has turned to crime for profit and excitement. That man must be found, though we turn heaven and earth to discover his identity."

Though he still had Doctor Devoll in mind as being the one whom several minor circumstances had led him to suspect, Carter

did not once think of Professor Karl Graff, whom he had seen only for a couple of minutes when investigating the death of Gaston Todd, and whose appearance and deportment were in no degree impressive, to say nothing of inviting suspicion.

"Gee whiz!" Patsy exclaimed, replying. "It strikes me, chief, that that motor car is a clew worth following. We know that one of the two men at the road house killed Leary's cat, and it's dollars to fried rings that he is the man we want to identify. In spite of the false number plates used last night, I think I can run down that car, if I go on a still hunt for it."

"Think you can, eh?" queried Carter tersely.

"I sure do," said Patsy confidently.

"There are about a thousand cars of that type in Madison. You'll do good work, Patsy, if you round up that particular one."

"Good work is my long suit, chief," Patsy earnestly argued. "You ought to know that."

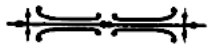
"So I do, Patsy."

"Let me try, then. I'll bet I can make good."

"Very well," Carter abruptly decided. "Set to work as soon as you like. In the meantime, Chick, I will see Chief Gleason and get cards for to-night. I want you to accompany me. If this master criminal, whoever he is, can put one over on us and get away with Mrs. Thurlow's pearls, I'll chuck my vocation and start a peanut stand."

Nick arose from the table with the last, all having finished their breakfast, and Patsy was so eager to be off on the work he had voluntarily assumed and the outcome of which he had so confidently predicted that he hurried up to their suite in advance of the others, getting such articles as he required and leaving the house without further instructions.

Nick Carter sauntered into police headquarters about ten o'clock that morning, and found Chief Gleason in his private office.



"Too busy to see me?" he inquired carelessly when the chief looked up and then swung quickly around in his swivel chair.

"Too busy? I should say not!" he exclaimed, with a perceptible frown. "I was expecting to see you."

"That so?" queried Nick, while he drew up a chair.

"Very much so," Gleason said brusquely. "See here, Carter, what are you putting over on me?"

"Putting over on you?" Nick's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Exactly."

"I don't quite get you, Gleason."

"You ought to get me. Why haven't I seen you since yesterday morning? Why haven't you reported? In other words, Carter, what are you doing about this Todd murder and these other cases?"

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Nick, who had been wondering what was coming. "I had begun to fear there was something wrong.

Putting over on you, eh? Did you really expect me, Gleason, to run in here every hour or two and report the progress of my work? That's not my way of doing business."

"I know, Carter; I know," Gleason more quietly protested, warned by a subtle ring in the detective's voice. "But we really have nothing on Paulding, nothing at all definite, nothing that warrants holding him in custody. It was upon your advice that we arrested him."

"I guess you have made no mistake."

"But——"

"He has not kicked against it, has he?"

"No, no, not exactly, yet——"

"Stop a moment," Nick interrupted. "How long were you and your score of subordinates at work on these mysterious crimes before you sent for me?"

"Why, several months, as you know."

"And accomplished nothing."

"Why, nothing material."

"Several months and nothing accomplished," said Nick pointedly. "I have been in Madison only two days, Gleason, yet you expect me to begin turning in reports and possibly to have solved the problem that has baffled you for months. Don't be foolish, Gleason. Rome was not built in a day."

"But you might at least keep me informed now and then as to——"

"Nonsense!" Nick cut in again. "I'll report, Gleason, when I have anything worth reporting, and not until then. If that doesn't satisfy the Madison chief of police, I'll chuck the whole business and hike back to New York."

"No, no, don't say that," Chief Gleason quickly entreated. "I may have been a bit impatient, Carter, but only because of my anxiety concerning Paulding, who really is a very decent fellow. I don't want to put him in wrong, you know."

“I am the one who has done the putting, Gleason, and I will take all of the responsibility,” Nick replied. “But do not be impatient or needlessly anxious. There will be something doing sooner or later, and you shall know all about it.”

“Well, well, that ought to satisfy me, I suppose, coming from you,” Gleason said more agreeably. “I should have known better than to have questioned your judgment. Have you discovered anything worthy of mention?”

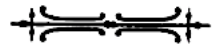
“Not yet, but I’m on the way,” the detective said evasively. “I can tell you nothing definite at present. Incidentally, however, I wish to attend the reception and ball of the National Guards this evening. I suppose you have been called upon to take the customary precautions.”

“Yes, indeed,” Gleason quickly nodded. “Ten of my men are to be there in plain clothes. It will be a swell affair, with much costly jewelry worn, no doubt, and we are taking unusual precautions.”

“Quite right,” Carter said approvingly. “I want you to get me two tickets and the necessary cards.”

“I can give them to you now.” Gleason opened a drawer in his desk. “I was supplied with a dozen, but need only ten. Here are the other two.”

“Good enough.” Nick slipped them into his pocket. “Say nothing about my going, by the way, for I don’t want that generally known. After this ball, Gleason, I may have something to report,” he said significantly, while he arose to go.



CHAPTER XIX.
PATSY ON THE TRAIL.

Good work is right. It sure will be some stunt to find that particular car, as the chief said, but there's more than one way to kill a cat. I'll find it, by gracious, or lose a leg."

These were Patsy Garvan's mental declarations when he left the Wilton House at nine o'clock that morning, not only determined to find the motor car he had seen the previous night, but also to identify its chauffeur and his two passengers.

"I'll go the whole hog," he added to himself. "If I discover the chauffeur, I'll not quit till I have learned who was with him. I'll make good the limit, if I make good at all."

His first visit proved futile, and he then consulted a directory and noted the location of every public garage. He then proceeded from one to another as quickly as possible,

searching each in the same way, but with the same negative result.

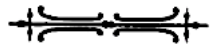
In only one was he questioned by the proprietor, but Patsy was ready for him, and politely explained.

“I am thinking of buying a car next month, sir, and am merely having a look at these. I hope you have no objection.”

“Certainly not in that case,” was the reply. “Go as far as you like.”

“I’ll go far and go some, I reckon, before I hook onto the right one,” thought Patsy, who then had been thus at work for several hours, stopping only for lunch in a convenient restaurant. “The car might be out, of course, even if I were to hit the right garage, providing it is kept in a public one. I’ve got to take the chance. I’ll stick, too, by ginger, till I find it.”

It was after three o’clock when he emerged from the last garage on his list, and his face wore a look of irrepressible disappointment, though his ardor and determination had not waned.



"Where next?" he asked himself. "The day is two-thirds gone and I'm no better off than when I started. It would be impossible to visit every private garage. Nor could I identify that chauffeur in a passing car if he was in disguise last night, or tell whether the number plates have been removed or temporarily changed by some means. If changed, by Jove, there's one way that might be done. There may be something in this."

He was hit with a new idea, one that immediately struck him as promising. He had in mind, of course, that all of the license plates of that State were blue and numbered with white figures. Returning to the business section, from which his long search had taken him, he again consulted a directory and made a list of the paint stores, one of which he presently entered and questioned the proprietor.

His inquiries proved vain, however, and he hastened to another. Not until close upon five o'clock was he successful, when, accosting the proprietor of a small shop in a

side street, he began the same line of inquiries.

“Do you keep vaseline or a paste of any kind that I could color with a pigment?”

“I have vaseline in small jars. What color do you want to make it?”

“Prussian blue,” said Patsy, that being the body color of the number plates.

“You can mix the Prussian blue powder with the vaseline all right?”

“Making a paste that would stick for a time and then wipe off easily?”

“Yes, surely.”

“Do you have many calls for Prussian blue?”

“Not many. You are the second one within a week, though,” said the proprietor. “Toby Monk bought a box three or four days ago. That’s the second, by the way, that he has bought within a month. He uses it mebbe the same as you do.”

“What’s his business? I’m an artist,” said Patsy, lest these inquiries might reach the ears of the said Toby Monk.

“He’s a chauffeur,” replied the storekeeper. “He owns a car and runs it as a jitney part of the time, when he’s not driving for a man who frequently employs him.”

“What man is that?” inquired Patsy, suppressing any betrayal of his elation.

“I don’t know his name.”

“Or where he lives?”

“No.”

“He’s a merchant, perhaps, or a doctor, or ——”

“I don’t know anything about him. Why are you so anxious to know who and——”

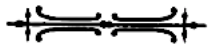
“Oh, I’m not anxious,” Patsy cut in quickly. “I was only wondering how the fellow you spoke of used the color. Give me one can of it, smallest size, and a small jar of vaseline.”

Patsy’s explanation was glibly made, and the storekeeper appeared to attach no further

significance to his customer's curiosity. He wrapped up the two articles, and Patsy paid him and departed, afterward tossing the package mentioned among some weeds in a vacant lot.

"Only a lunkhead would have questioned him further," he said to himself, now feeling almost sure that he had hit the right trail. "Toby Monk, eh? I'll soon find out where he lives and what is generally known about him. Bought Prussian blue twice, has he? It's a hundred to one that he has been using it to temporarily blot out a figure with blue paste matching the background of his number plate, or to so cover part of one or more figures as to form others, apparently giving the plate an entirely different number when engaged in a job like that of last night. Blue paste could be quickly wiped off after the job was done. I'll find out mighty soon whether I am right and have nailed one of the suspects."

He hastened to a near drug store, and again resorted to the city directory. He found that



Toby Monk lodged in Green Street, and thither he then hastened.

He learned, after a little roundabout questioning in an opposite cigar store, that Toby Monk kept his car in an unused stable about a block away, and that he could usually be found between six and seven o'clock in Foley's saloon and restaurant in Prince Street, where he often went for his beer and supper.

It then was nearly six, with dusk beginning to gather, and Patsy lost no time in seeking the stable mentioned. It stood in the back yard of an inferior wooden dwelling. The stable door was open, and the car stood within, apparently the one he had pursued the previous night, though he could not now see the number plates.

"I must make dead sure of it," he said to himself, after sauntering by the house and turning merely a furtive gaze toward the stable. "Toby Monk may be in this house, since his car is here, and I'd better not venture through the yard. I'll go round to the next street and steal between those two

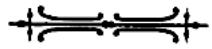
houses back of the stable. There may be a back window, and I could easily climb the fence."

It took him about three minutes to reach the rear of the stable, which he accomplished without being seen, and he found the window he was seeking. He found it unlocked, moreover, and within half a minute he was crouching back of the touring car, inspecting the number plate.

It was as clean as a whistle, though the rest of the car was quite dusty. Obviously it had been recently wiped. Plainly, too, the number, 12674, could be apparently changed to 2671, the very number he had seen the previous night, by eliminating the 1 and the loop of the 4 by covering them with the blue paste.

"By Jove, this does settle it!" Patsy muttered, after a brief inspection. "Here's a smooch of dirty blue grease, too, on the tire. Possibly I can find the——"

Turning quickly, he discovered what he had in mind. A wad of cotton waste soiled with



greasy blue paste had been tossed amid some rubbish in one corner.

On a beam near by was an open can of Prussian blue powder, and near it a tin box containing some of the paste and a soiled brush.

Patsy did not want more convincing evidence. He stole out by the way he had entered, easily departing unseen in the deepening dusk, and feeling reasonably sure that Toby Monk then would be found in the saloon mentioned.

"I'll have a look, at all events," he said to himself. "Toby was the chauffeur, all right, and through him I may identify the others. Gee whiz! It's lucky I thought of that method to alter the number plate. It put me on the right track. I'll drop the chief a line in the next letter box, lest I unexpectedly throw a shoe, and then I'll keep up my good work. I'll be hanged if I'll quit a trail that's just warming up."

It was half past six, and dusk had turned to darkness, when Patsy approached Foley's

saloon in Prince Street, within a block of police headquarters. It was a restaurant and barroom of the better class, with a corresponding patronage, and he paused briefly on the opposite side to gaze through the broad plate-glass windows.

He could see nearly a score of men in the saloon, some talking and drinking at the bar, others seated in a row of side booths, and nearly as many in the rear restaurant. He was unable to discover one so like the chauffeur in height and figure as to be sure of his identity, however, and he then decided to enter and use his wits. Approaching the bar, he bought a glass of beer and lingered to drink it moderately. Taking a moment when one of the bartenders was idle and near him, he inquired carelessly:

"How far must I go to hit a jitney?"

"Main Street, two blocks east," said the bartender tersely.

"Don't any of them go through this street?"

"Sometimes, but not regular. Mebbe, though, that——" The bartender stopped

and looked searchingly toward the restaurant, until his gaze fell upon a man at one of the side tables. “Ah, there he is! I thought he was there.”

“Thought who was here?”

“Toby Monk. He runs a jitney, but he is eating his supper. His car may be outside.”

“Where does he leave it?”

“Just above here.”

“There is no car out there,” said Patsy. “I just came in and would have seen it.”

“He’s put it up until later, then, as he often does about this time.”

“It don’t matter,” said Patsy. “The walking’s good.”

He turned away indifferently, and was pleased to see that other customers then claimed the attention of the bartender. Having carefully noted in which direction he had gazed a moment before, Patsy easily determined on which man his eyes had lingered, and he now furtively sized him up —a well-built man in the thirties, with a

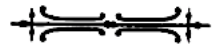
dark, smooth-shaven face, a square jaw, and thin lips, having a downward curve that gave him a sinister expression.

But Patsy's train of thought was cut short when Toby Monk, rising abruptly from a seat at the table, took his cap from a wall rack and strode out through the saloon.

At the same moment a burly, red-featured man entered from the street, and the two met just within the swinging doors and scarce six feet from that end of the bar at which Patsy was standing. He saw Toby Monk start slightly, as if surprised, and then heard him exclaim, with inquiring scrutiny:

"Hello! What's up, Shannon?"

"Shannon!" Patsy echoed the name mentally, with a thrill of increasing elation. "That's the name of the attendant the chief saw in Doctor Devoll's private room. He answers his description, too. Gee whiz, the net is tightening for fair! It now is a cinch that Doctor Devoll is one of the gang, and very possible the big finger."



Patsy missed nothing that was said while these thoughts flashed through his mind. Shannon had stopped short the moment he saw the chauffeur, to whom he quickly replied, and with his gruff voice only slightly subdued:

"You're wanted, Toby."

"Wanted by——"

"You know," Shannon cut in quickly. "I have orders for you."

"What's doing? Why did you come here after me?"

"I'll tell you on the way. This is no time or place. Get a move on and go with me."

"I'll go with you also if it's all the same to you two rascals—or whether it is or not," thought Patsy as he edged toward the door and followed the two men to the street.

CHAPTER XX.
BIRDS OF PREY.

The trail picked up by Patsy Garvan was becoming so hot, indeed, as he had expressed it, that he now had absolutely no idea of quitting it. He followed the two suspects through Prince Street, noting that they were engaged in a subdued and very earnest discussion, with Shannon doing most of the talking, but Patsy did not venture to attempt overhearing them.

"I could pick up only a word or two at the most, and must take a chance of being seen and suspected," he rightly reasoned. "That would put them on their guard and knock a further espionage on the head. I'd better keep them in the dark and try to see what's coming off. If Shannon brought orders from some one to this sinister-looking scamp, it's long odds that Doctor Devoll was the one. There sure is something in the wind."

It soon was evident to him that the two men were heading for the stable in which Toby Monk kept his car, and he began to fear that he was booked for the same difficulties he had had the previous night. He felt quite sure of it, in fact, when both men entered the stable and Toby Monk partly closed the front door, precluding a view from the street.

Presently, however, a feeble light from a smoky lantern could be seen, and Patsy muttered perplexedly:

"What do they want of that? They can't be going out with the car, after all, or a lantern would not be needed. They may have come here only to escape observation while planning a job. I can very soon find out by making use of the back window again."

He was on his way with the last thought. A couple of minutes brought him to the back fence, over which he climbed noiselessly, and then crept near enough to see and hear through the dusty back window.

Toby Monk was on his knees with a box of blue paste and a brush, engaged in altering

the figures on the rear number plate of the touring car.

Shannon was seated on a box near by, with his brawny arms resting on his knees, while he grimly watched the chauffeur's artistic alterations.

"You'd better let the top down, too, Toby," he advised, after a moment. "That will help."

"Mebbe so, Jim, since I'm never seen with it down," Monk replied. "I'll drop it before leaving."

"Besides, it might be a bit in the way," Shannon pointedly added. "It's easier to get into an open car. This trick has got to be turned on the jump, mind you."

"I know that, Jim, all right, and you can bet I'll do my part."

"Have I made it perfectly plain to you?"

"As plain as twice two."

"The signal— —"

“There’s no need to repeat it, Jim,” Toby protested, interrupting, much to Patsy’s disappointment. “I’ve got the whole business down pat, so far as my part in the job goes. You may tell his nibs he may bank on that.”

“The hour——”

“I know,” Monk again cut in impatiently. “You need never repeat an order that he sends me. There’s too much coming, Jim, for me to go lame.”

“I’ll be off, then, Toby, and tell him I found you,” said Shannon, rising abruptly. “He’ll be waiting for me by this time.”

“Go ahead, then, and I’ll see you later.”

“Sure thing, Toby, bar a slip-up of some kind,” Shannon paused to add. “You know what we are up against.”

“Rats! Trust his nibs to get the best of that bunch. No dicks can fool him. He’ll put something over on them that they never heard of.”

Shannon laughed grimly, picking his way around the touring car, and left the dingy, dimly lighted stable.

Patsy Garvan hesitated only for a moment. He remembered the previous night. He knew that he might find it utterly impossible to follow Toby Monk, who evidently was soon going to use his car, and Patsy immediately stole around the stable, taking advantage of the darkness to dart back of the rear dwelling, and in another moment he was stealthily following Shannon up the street.

"Going to tell his nibs, is he?" thought Patsy, with ever-increasing elation. "If I don't learn who is back of this whole business, then there'll be something wrong with the cards. Get the best of the chief, will he? I guess not!"

He found it easy to shadow his unsuspecting quarry. He trailed him to an outskirt of the business section, where Shannon paused briefly in a gloomy doorway and put on a disguise. Five minutes later, after looking sharply in each direction, he entered a court flanking one end of a large stone building.

"By gracious!" thought Patsy, gazing up at it. "This is the Waldmere Chambers, the building in which Todd was killed. Has the gang a headquarters here, or is it where only the chief himself hangs out? In either case, by Jove! I'm getting in right at last."

Stealing nearer, he peered cautiously into the court. Shannon had disappeared in the deeper darkness. Following noiselessly, Patsy brought up at a solid wooden gate about six feet high, and he then heard a door closed and the snap of a lock. It told him plainly enough that Doctor David Devoll's burly attendant had entered the building.

"Gee whiz! I must not lose track of him," Patsy muttered under his breath. "I'll take chances to guard against that. Locked, by thunder!"

Patsy had vainly tried to open the gate. He saw that it closed an alley about five feet wide between the rear of the Waldmere Chambers and the blank back wall of another lofty building. He drew himself up and looked over it. He could see a door some ten feet away, and directly above it a

single-lighted window, the roller shade of which was drawn nearly to the sill.

"That's a rear office on the second floor," Patsy rightly reasoned. "That door must open into a basement, however, for the land slopes toward the front of the building. By Jove! I must find out what's doing."

Without a sound that could have been heard in the office mentioned, he climbed over the gate and dropped upon the pavement in the alley, then picked his way through the gloom toward the door. He then found that it was an ordinary storm door, opening outward and protecting an interior one, which was securely locked.

He listened vainly for any sound from within, also at two ground-glass windows near by, evidently those of a basement, then as dark as a pocket. Both were securely fastened.

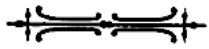
"Gee! I'm no better off," he said to himself. "If I could get up to that lighted window, I might learn whether Shannon is there, or—by gum! I have it. I can both see and hear,

all right, by standing on the top of this outer door. It's some stunt to get up there, though, without being heard."

He demurred only briefly, seeing no other way to accomplish his object. He opened the door, then hung by his hands from the top for a moment, finding that the hinges would support him. He then drew himself up, working one leg over the outer corner, and finally worming himself to a seat on the unsteady perch. Twice he had swung against the building, but met the wall noiselessly with his shoulder.

Reaching up, he then could grasp the stone sill of the lighted window. He drew himself up, hanging clear of the door, then nearly closed it with his feet, bringing it to a position directly under the window, enabling him to stand in a crouching posture on it, still grasping the stone sill.

A beam of light from under the roller shade then fell on Patsy's grimly determined face. Voices from within reached his ears. He peered into the room and saw, seated in



opposite chairs, Jim Shannon and Professor Karl Graff.

"The man I trailed to Leary's road house! The man who killed the cat!" The thoughts flashed swiftly through Patsy's mind. "By gracious, it now is a cinch! He's the big finger of the gang. But who the deuce is he?"

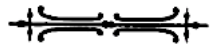
Though puzzled as to his identity, Patsy read plainly in Professor Graff's gray-bearded face that he was discussing something of serious importance. His narrow eyes had a vicious gleam and glitter. He was drawn forward in his chair, with his hands clenched on his knees and his gaze riveted on Shannon's dark face, from which he had removed his disguise.

"You made it clear to him, Jim, perfectly clear?" Graff was asking. "There must be no mistake, no delay."

"There'll be none," Shannon gruffly informed him. "You can bank on that."

"The number plates——"

"I left him changing them."



"The position he is to take with the car——"

"He knows the very spot."

"The signal——"

"Your flash light—he knows," Shannon cut in again. "He'll be watching for it."

"And what he then must do?"

"The whole business. He has it down pat from A to Z."

Graff settled back in his chair. He appeared satisfied with these forcible assurances. He fell to rubbing his hands, his eyes gleaming with malicious triumph,

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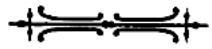
a gleam and glitter so intense that Patsy Garvan felt that he was gazing at a madman.

"If he isn't dippy, a pronounced victim of criminal mania, I'm no judge of human faces," he said to himself. "Human be hanged! He has the look of a devil, and all the makings of one, if I'm not mistaken."

"We'll balk him, thwart him, turn this trick on him, Shannon, in spite of all he can do,"

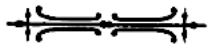


Graff snapped viciously after a moment. "Then, if he dares to remain in Madison—well, God help him! His fate will be on his own head. I have told him. I have warned him."

"He means the chief," thought Patsy. "This was the rascal who sent him the letter, and he refers to the theft of Mrs. Thurlow's pearls. They've been planning it, and that's the job Toby Monk is booked for to-night. If I can but learn the details of their scheme, it will be soft walking for the chief to foil their game and collar the entire gang. I'm on the way, all right."

Patsy felt reasonably sure of it, indeed, and he was missing nothing that passed between the two conspirators. Shannon appeared oblivious to Graff's display of feeling, though he smiled a bit grimly and said:

"You can turn the dick down, all right, if need be, and none would get wise. All I hope is that he won't be able to queer this job. There would be something coming to us from it, a deal more than usual."



"It's as sure as if you already had it in your pocket, Shannon, if my instructions are carefully followed."

"They will be," Shannon nodded. "What does Tim Hurst think about it? Where does he fit in?"

"He's to work the trick with me."

"Any one else?"

"Only Dorson."

"Is it safe to rely upon him?"

"There will be no safety for him if he disappoints me," Graff declared, with vicious asperity. "He knows what it will cost and that he'll pay the price. You know what befell the one treacherous cur who dared to defy me and threatened to expose——"

"Enough of that," Shannon cut in, with a growl. "I don't like to think of it, much less talk about it. What has become of Hurst, anyway?"

"I have not seen him since last night, after he searched the rooms of that servile cur." Graff spoke with an ugly snarl. "He found

papers that would have exposed us, but they now are ashes only. Luckily, too, he was in time to down one of the Nick Carter gang, who otherwise would have found the same and had us by the ears."

"We'll get you all right, sooner or later," thought Patsy. "Tim Hurst, eh? The masked man whom Chick encountered. Give us a little more time and we'll uncover all of these hidden faces."

"Downed him, did he?" queried Shannon. "He must be a lightweight dick that Tim could down, for all he's quick and clever."

Professor Graff laughed for a moment as if much tickled, but his mirth had qualities that sent a chill down Patsy's spine.

"I had made it easy for him," Graff replied, still chuckling with evil pride. "He wore an unsuspected weapon, an electrical device of mine that would overcome a horse. Let Tim alone to make good when in a tight place."

"But it's near seven," Shannon growled, glancing at the clock. "If he's to work with you to-night——"

"He'll come," Graff cut in quickly. "He'll show up on time. He's due here now."

"Due here! Will he sneak in this way, or enter from the front street? If he comes while I'm up here——"

Patsy caught his breath, scenting speedy trouble.

A key had been thrust into the lock, and almost instantly the gate was opened and hurriedly closed. A slender, black-clad figure had entered the alley, a thin-featured, keen-eyed man of about thirty, who quickly jerked the key from the lock.

Patsy had as quickly decided what he would do. He knew he could not leap down from his unsteady perch undetected and retreat farther into the alley. He took, therefore, his only chance to escape observation, knowing that he could not hold up the intruder without alarming his confederates. Firmly grasping the stone sill of the window, he drew up his legs and raised his feet from the top of the door, hoping the man would pass under him and enter without seeing him.

The ruse came near proving successful. Tim Hurst strode quickly to the storm door and flung it open, then fished out a key to the inner one. He had heard nothing alarming nor seen the crimped figure hanging close to the dark wall directly above him.

Just then, however, a bit of cement broke from the stone under Patsy's rigid grasp, and it fell straight down upon Hurst's head. He drew back as if electrified,

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looking up, and as quick as a flash he guessed the truth. On the instant, too, while he uttered a short, sharp whistle, he leaped up and seized Patsy's legs, snarling fiercely:

"Come down here! Let go, blast you, or — —"

Hurst was not given time to say more.

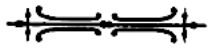
Patsy heard Graff and Shannon spring up and rush down a back stairway in response to the whistle, and he realized that only quick work could save him. He let go of the sill and dropped straight down upon Hurst's head and shoulders, worming quickly

around as he pitched over him, and trying to grapple him around his arms and waist.

The lithe and wiry rascal was alert, however, and as quick of motion as a cat. He also twisted around when Patsy fell, spreading his feet to steady himself, and then, with a lightning like lurch toward the building, he brought Patsy's head against the stone wall, a blow that nearly cracked his skull and dazed him so that he hardly knew what immediately followed.

In a vague way, however, he realized that he was being roughly handled, that Graff and Shannon had rushed out into the alley, and that the three men were hurriedly taking him into the building.

He heard both doors closed and locked, then was conscious of being placed roughly on a cold cement floor, with two of the ruffians nearly crushing him in the inky darkness. This was dispelled in a moment by a glare of electric light, and the cobwebs then had cleared from his brain sufficiently for him to size up the surroundings.



He saw at a glance that he was in a chemical laboratory, a large, square room with shelved walls, laden with bottles, jars, carboys, and the like. A zinc-covered table was littered with the customary articles required by a chemist. There was a closet in one corner. Near by was an open door, an adjoining entry, and a narrow stairway leading up to the room in which the two men had been seated.

Patsy still was gazing around when Graft approached him, commanding his two confederates to bind him, which they quickly proceeded to do with cords brought from the closet, while Tim Hurst hurriedly stated where he discovered their captive.

“Who are you? Who sent you here to play the spy?” he fiercely questioned.

Though he keenly realized that he was in wrong, and that much of his good work might prove futile, Patsy lost neither his head nor his nerve.

“No one sent me,” he answered curtly. “I came on my own hook.”

"You lie!" Graff snapped harshly. "You are in Nick Carter's employ."

"By Heaven, I guess that's right," Shannon agreed, with a snarl. "He's one of the dicks."

"We'll dick him! We'll dick him all right when the time comes," Graff fiercely declared. "But not now, not yet. The Thurlow pearls are of first importance, and I have only time to prepare for that job. We'll settle with him later. Gag him, Shannon, and lock him in the closet. You must wait here and watch till we return. Make sure the whelp can't escape. I'll fix him later. I'll fix him."

"Gee whiz!" thought Patsy. "If he makes good as he looks, I can see my finish."

CHAPTER XXI.
STOLEN PEARLS.

Nick Carter wore a worried look at eight o'clock that evening. Both he and Chick then were dressing for the elaborate reception and ball tendered to the local National Guards, generally admitted to be the chief social event slated

for that season in Madison, and during which the unknown crook whom the detectives were so anxious to identify had threatened to commit the crime the latter were grimly determined to prevent.

Nick Carter's anxiety, however, was not because his life also had been threatened and might possibly be taken, in case he became an insurmountable obstacle to the designs of the mysterious and daring desperado. He was thinking of Patsy Garvan, his prolonged absence, the occasion for which he could not fathom, knowing that Patsy ordinarily would have reported by telephone, at least, in view of the work engaging him, unless something very unexpected and equally serious prevented him.

The detective did not blind himself, moreover, to the fact that his own designs had been repeatedly anticipated and balked by the unknown knave or by members of his gang, in spite of his own expeditious work and the precautions he had taken. He realized most keenly that he was up against a remarkably crafty and resourceful

scoundrel. He began to fear that Patsy had fallen into his hands and, in spite of his confidence in his own skill and prowess, that he also might be booked for failure and utterly unable to prevent the threatened theft of Mrs. Mortimer Thurlow's pearls.

"It would be perfectly easy to foil the rascals, if that was all we wished to accomplish," said the detective, while he and Chick were discussing their plans. "But that is not enough."

"Certainly not," declared Chick. "We must take advantage of the circumstances to discover their identity and in some way contrive to arrest them."

"Exactly. We must allow them enough leeway, therefore, to be sure they will attempt the crime," Carter pointed out. "They know what they are up against and that we are out to get them. If we remain too near to Mrs. Thurlow, as if ready to instantly grab any one that lays a finger on her, there will be nothing to it. The miscreants will throw up the job."

"Surely," Chick agreed. "No sane man would attempt it under such conditions."

"The fact that we are carefully disguised, moreover, would not deceive them. They would suspect any men who constantly hung around within reach of Mrs. Thurlow, and would very soon identify us. We must give them enough leeway, therefore, as I have said, to be sure they will make the attempt."

"I agree with you," Chick nodded.

"It goes without saying, nevertheless, that we must be in a position to constantly watch the woman," Carter added. "Having no idea just when the theft may be attempted, we must not lose sight of her for a moment."

"What plan had we better adopt?"

"We can lay no elaborate plan. It will be of advantage, however, if we keep an eye on one another, as well as on the woman, and contrive to keep her constantly between us. That will enable us to head off a thief in two directions, at least."

"I see the point."

"We must be alert, also, to detect any person whose looks or actions warrant suspicion," Carter continued. "It is barely possible that one of us can discover the crook before the theft is attempted."

"I'll put you wise, chief, in that case, and you do the same."

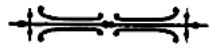
"Yes, of course."

"Her nephew is to be her escort, you say."

"Yes. His name is Dorson. He will accompany both Mrs. Thurlow and her daughter, and we can identify them when they arrive."

"And our work must begin at that moment."

"Exactly. Naturally, of course, Dorson will pay considerable attention to Mrs. Thurlow, and I don't think his presence will deter the crooks, for I have directed her to say nothing to him about expecting a crime. There is no occasion for any one to suspect him, of course, even though he is with her much of the time."



The detective added the last while they were about to leave. It was a perfectly natural supposition, of course, that the man of whom he was speaking was entirely trustworthy. He did not have a thought to the contrary, and, therefore, he could not foresee the fatal result of this misplaced confidence in Mr. John Dorson.

It was a brilliant scene upon which the two detectives arrived soon after eight o'clock, which they knew would be sufficiently early. The streets adjoining the park in which the handsome new armory building was situated, in the vast hall and drill room, on the second floor of which the ball was to be held, were crowded with costly, brightly lighted automobiles of nearly every type, leaving as rapidly as possible a throng of fashionably clad men and elaborately gowned women, many lavishly adorned with radiant gems and jewels.

Fortune favored the detectives at first. They had been waiting only a few minutes in the broad reception hall on the ground floor, when Carter saw Mrs. Thurlow and Edna

arrive in company with a tall, somewhat cadaverous man, who he knew must be Mr. John Dorson.

"There they are, Chick," he said quietly. "The woman has not weakened. She is doing her part, indeed, to help us nail our man. She is wearing the rope of pearls."

"Some pearls, too," Chick muttered admiringly. "By Jove! they warrant taking a desperate chance. That tall fellow is Dorson, I suppose."

"Surely."

"He's not very attractive. He has the look of a rounder."

"Not as bad as that, I guess," said Carter. "I think Mrs. Thurlow would have told me. Step down that way and keep an eye on her. We now must watch her constantly."

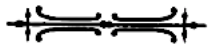
Both had been standing in an alcove formed by the rise of the broad, main stairway. The latter led up to a wide corridor flanking three sides of the ballroom, which was accessible from each through several broad, pillared doorways. In the end wall of the room was a

row of open French windows, leading out upon the balcony roof of a wide veranda overlooking an avenue through the park mentioned, in which numerous automobiles already had gathered to await the end of the festivities.

One among them had arrived quite early and obtained a position of special advantage, close to the broad avenue and within easy view of the veranda and balcony. It attracted no more attention than any of the others, neither did the chauffeur, who sat motionless at his wheel. None would have recognized his bearded face, nor could the car have been traced from the license number it then appeared to bear.

It was to these conditions and surroundings that Professor Karl Graff had referred while talking with Dorson in the road house, and of which he and his knavish confederates were prepared to take every advantage.

Chick slipped away from his chief, as the latter had directed, and took a position from which he could watch the door of a room to which Mrs. Thurlow and Edna had gone to

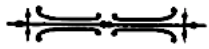


leave their outside garments, while Dorson hastened to another to check his crush hat and Inverness. Though his face was unusually pale and grave, it wore no expression inviting suspicion.

He returned in a few moments and rejoined Edna Thurlow, departing with her through the throng in the lower corridor and mingling with the stream of wealth and fashion then seeking the ballroom.

Mrs. Thurlow came out a little later and joined a group of women acting as a reception committee, and for nearly an hour she remained in the lower hall, apparently undisturbed by the threats of which she had been informed, and conducting herself precisely as if ignorant of them, as Carter had directed.

Both detectives, though they then were separated, had an eye on her all the while and on the rope of lustrous pearls adorning her shapely neck and perfect shoulders. Neither could detect any person near her inviting suspicion, however, and it really seemed improbable that so daring a theft



could be successfully committed, in view of the fact that it had been predicted and prevention audaciously invited.

It was ten o'clock when Mrs. Thurlow went up to the lavishly decorated ballroom. There, and in the adjoining corridors, a throng of several hundred guests were assembled. A dance then was in progress, however, and the corridors were less crowded than during the intervals between the dances.

Carter and Chick met on the stairs while following the woman quite closely, and Carter said a bit hurriedly, noting the direction she was taking:

"She's going to that end of the hall overlooking the balcony. I'll follow her. You hurry around through the corridor, so as to watch her from the opposite side of the hall. We then will have her guarded from both directions."

"Suppose she goes out on the balcony?"

"Slip out through one of the other windows. You must not lose sight of her."

"I've got you," Chick muttered, as he turned at the head of the stairs and hurried away.

Carter followed the woman in the opposite direction, admiring her outward composure and the nerve she was displaying. He saw her enter the last of the broad doors and thread her way by the throng of dancers, finally halting near one of the windows leading out to the balcony, where she was immediately joined by a colonel of the Guards, in full-dress uniform, and a lady, with whom he had been dancing.

Carter paused in the broad doorway, with a quick and searching glance in each direction. He caught sight of Chick, just entering a door directly across the broad, brightly lighted hall. He saw Edna Thurlow amid the throng of dancers, and noticed that she was pale and paying little attention to the remarks of her partner. He saw, too, the tall form of Mr. John Dorson, who then was standing alone near the second window beyond that near which Mrs. Thurlow had halted.

Though none could know it save the miscreant who had planned the daring job, the situation then was one for which he had been waiting, the crucial moment when conditions assured him of success, when the avenue fronting the veranda was unobstructed, when flight would be easy, when the throng in the ballroom were absorbed in the dance, when the strains of orchestral music drowned all other sounds, and when the victim of his designs had paused at a time and place that perfectly served his purpose.

Two inconspicuous, bearded men in evening dress, who had apparently been talking carelessly on the balcony, suddenly separated.

One of them glided quickly toward the window near which Mrs. Thurlow was standing, taking a position close against the wall.

The other moved in the opposite direction, stopping short near the second window and taking a small electric flash light from his pocket. Hooding it with both hands, so that

its glare might not be observed by any of the persons then on the balcony, he lighted the lens for a moment, so holding it that it could be seen from the grounds, on which motionless motor cars then were parked.

The signal was answered almost instantly. The lamps of one of the motionless motor cars shot a quick glare outward over the avenue, and in another moment it was moving moderately in that direction.

The man with a searchlight turned quickly and entered the French window. He passed directly back of Dorson, and, without stopping, whispered hurriedly:

"Now, Dorson, be quick! Get in your work!"

Dorson started as if stung. He did not recognize the bearded man, but there was no mistaking his voice, that fierce, sibilant hiss that he had heard at the road house—the threatening voice of Professor Karl Graff.

Dorson instantly pulled himself together, nevertheless, and nerved himself for what he had undertaken. He took the celluloid box from his pocket, concealing it in his hand,

and removed the cover, at the same time walking toward Mrs. Thurlow, at whom he had been gazing when he heard Graff's threatening command.

When nearly back of her, Dorson stooped to the floor and pretended to pick up a handkerchief—which he had deftly removed from the box, quickly replacing the latter in his pocket.

"Pardon me," said he, stepping in front of her. "You have dropped your handkerchief, Aunt Clara."

The colonel talking with her turned at once to his partner, and they whirled away amid other dancing couples.

"My handkerchief, Jack?" Mrs. Thurlow took it, but with a look of surprise.

"I think so." Dorson drew back a step and with one hand covered his mouth and nostrils.

"No, this is not mine. You are mistaken."

"Are you sure, Aunt Clara? It was on the floor behind you. I thought you had dropped it."

Mrs. Thurlow bowed her head a little closer to examine it, still much crumpled, unfolding it and seeking an initial.

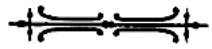
"No, it is not mine, Jack," she repeated. "It may be marked, however, or—or——"

Her voice suddenly died away to a whisper. She looked up at Dorson, as if strangely dazed, and he saw her eyes quickly taking on the vacant expression that had been predicted, the pupils contracting to mere pinpoints, abnormally bright, while her lips turned from red to a dull gray.

Though his every nerve was quivering with secret terror, Dorson kept his head and continued to play his part. He instantly took the woman's arm, saying quietly:

"You are pale and look tired. Step out on the balcony with me. The air will revive you."

Mrs. Thurlow obeyed him as if in a trance or a victim of an hypnotic spell. She walked out with him through the French window.



There was a large wicker chair near by, and Dorson placed her in it, then

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whisked the fateful handkerchief from her fingers and thrust it into his pocket. Then he hurried back into the ballroom, through which he passed as if in haste to obtain water, as he really was.

The man lurking near the wall in the dim light instantly approached the woman. Pausing beside her chair, he bowed as if to converse with her. His keen, black eyes shot one swift glance at a few persons on a remote part of the balcony. None was observing him. His deft hands quickly lifted the rope of pearls and dropped it into his pocket. Then he took out a small glass vial, poured the contents of it upon a sponge, and held the latter to the woman's nostrils for a few seconds.

Mrs. Thurlow gasped and caught her breath.

The man accidentally dropped the vial and it rolled out of sight. He did not wait to search for it, did not dare to delay his departure. He

walked quickly toward a corner of the balcony, where the top of a vine-covered trellis rose just above the railing.

Toby Monk was at that moment passing the corner with his motor car.

Both Nick Carter and Chick had witnessed the episode in the ballroom, and the same thought arose in the minds of both—that Mrs. Thurlow was perfectly safe while with her nephew.

The moment that Dorson returned alone, however, both detectives felt a quick thrill of suspicion, an instinctive feeling that the fateful moment had arrived, and both hurried toward the nearest of the French windows, making their way as quickly as possible through the maze of whirling dancers.

Chick was the first to reach the balcony. Coming

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from the glare in the ballroom, he could not immediately see the seated woman in the dim light outside. He discovered her in a

moment, however, and ran toward her—just as his chief hurriedly approached from the opposite direction.

One glance at Mrs. Thurlow's white face, at her vacant eyes and lax figure, at the neck, then bare of its lustrous adornment—one glance was enough.

"By thunder, they've turned the trick!" Chick cried, staring. "That man Dorson must ——"

Carter did not wait to hear him. He had swung around like a flash, seeking the thief, knowing that scarce a minute had passed since the woman left the ballroom. The few persons then on the balcony had not observed any disturbance, but the detective instantly caught sight of the swaying top of the trellis mentioned.

He ran in that direction, reaching for his revolver, but he arrived at the corner of the balcony rail only in time to see a slender, black-clad figure leap into a moving motor car, that instantly sped away down the

avenue—Tim Hurst, with the rope of pearls in his pocket.

CHAPTER XXII.
WHERE THE TIDE TURNED.

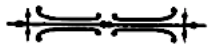
Nick Carter did not attempt to stop the fleeing crooks. He saw that the avenue was unobstructed, that the motor car already was attaining high speed, that a shot from his revolver would probably be wasted, and that pursuit was utterly out of the question. He turned back and hastened to rejoin Chick—just as Jack Dorson returned from the ballroom, bringing a glass of water.

Chick was the first to see him, and, having at once suspected him of aiding the crooks, he impulsively started to call him down.

"See here!" he exclaimed. "What motive did you have in bringing this woman——"

"A glass of water! Presumably, of course, because Mrs. Thurlow wanted it. She must have felt ill, for she appears to have fainted."

Carter had cut in quickly with the interruption, but with a blandness that at once told Chick that he did not want his



suspicions revealed to Dorson, and he immediately permitted his chief to take the ribbons.

The entire episode had transpired in far less time than is required to describe it. Scarce three minutes had passed since Professor Karl Graff, most skillfully disguised, an art in which his proficiency soon will become obvious, had seen the opportunity for which he had been waiting.

Mrs. Thurlow was beginning to recover, nevertheless, though still too dazed to realize what had occurred. But the stimulant or counteracting agent held to her nostrils by Tim Hurst, even while he robbed her of her pearls, was rapidly reviving her—as rapidly as in the case of the girl on a cot in the Osgood Hospital.

Nick had glanced in Dorson's direction when interrupting his assistant, and in the light shed through the French window he caught sight of something glistening back of Mrs. Thurlow's chair. He picked it up and slipped it into his pocket—the vial

accidentally dropped by Tim Hurst in his hasty departure.

Though the stir had been noticed by a few of the persons on the balcony, none supposed that a robbery had been committed, and none had approached to aid or interfere.

Jack Dorson saw at a glance that the rope of pearls was gone, however, and, with nerves now as tense as bowstrings, he quickly took advantage of the detective's remarks, not for a moment dreaming that they had been designedly made.

"Yes, yes, she said she felt faint," he replied, holding the glass of water to his aunt's lips. "I noticed in the ballroom that she was quite pale. I had picked up her handkerchief, or one I supposed was hers."

"I happened to see you," Carter nodded. "Wasn't it hers?"

"She said not."

"It appears to be missing."

"She must have dropped it again."

"Very likely."

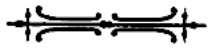
"I told her she had better come out in the air," Dorson was explaining very glibly, each moment feeling more sure of successfully hiding his guilt. "I came with her and placed her in this chair, and she then asked me to bring her some water."

"Exactly." Carter agreed with him readily. "I saw you returning hurriedly, and I thought there might be something wrong. That's why I came out here."

"Good heavens!" Dorson now exclaimed, as if suddenly alarmed. "There is something wrong. See? Her rope of pearls is gone. She was wearing it when I left her."

"It may have unclasped and fallen to the floor," the detective said quickly. "Look around. Try to find it."

Dorson obeyed with alacrity, thinking it the most consistent course for one anxious to appear entirely innocent, and Chick hastened to assist him in the search, now seeing plainly that his chief had some covert object in the negative steps he was taking.



Carter had seen, just as the theft of the pearls was mentioned, that Mrs. Thurlow was sufficiently recovered to appreciate the loss and also the mystifying situation. She had started up in her chair, and was feeling with frantic haste for the stolen treasure, when Carter bent nearer and grasped her arm, unobserved by the others.

"Collect yourself and listen," he whispered impressively. "I am Nick Carter, disguised. The pearls are gone, but that is part of the game I am playing. They will be returned to you to-morrow. Say not a word about me, not even to your nephew. I will return the pearls to you to-morrow evening."

"But——"

"Don't oppose me," Carter forcibly insisted. "Do only what I direct. All depends upon it. Tell Edna not to mention me in the hearing of others. Pretend, now, that you have been robbed and that I am a stranger."

The scene that immediately followed, for Mrs. Thurlow understood and yielded to him, was about what he expected, and also

what he wanted. Amid the ensuing stir and confusion, for an excited throng gathered as soon as the robbery was announced, he informed Dorson that he would go and notify the police, and in company with Chick he immediately departed.

Not until they were on their way down the avenue, however, did Chick make any comments or ask any questions. He then began with saying a bit disgustedly:

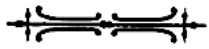
"We seem to be playing a losing game. Is that the size of it, chief, or what have you up your sleeve?"

"The crooks have the rope of pearls," Carter replied, with grim dryness. "There is no denying that."

"And we are beaten to a frazzle."

"Oh, no, not quite as bad as that," the detective quickly protested. "We are not done brown, Chick, by any means."

"What do you mean? Do you suspect Dorson?"



"Yes, certainly. It was he who made the crime possible. He was coöperating with the rascals who did the more hazardous work."

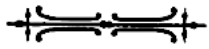
"That's what I suspected."

"It's as plain as twice two, Chick, in view of what we know about the girls found unconscious in the hospital grounds. The handkerchief used by Dorson was impregnated with the same mysterious substance with which the girls were temporarily overcome. Obviously, too, the crook who got the pearls administered the antidote or Mrs. Thurlow would not have revived so quickly."

"The same antidote that restored the four girls."

"Undoubtedly. Those were experimental cases, Chick, as sure as I'm a foot high, in anticipation of this job. Doctor Devoll was trying out his narcotic, so to speak."

"You still think he is the chief culprit, the man behind the gun?"



"He was in every instance the man who revived the girls, the physician who appeared to perfectly understand each case."

"That's true," Chick nodded. "I see the point. But why did you conceal your suspicions from Dorson?"

"Because nothing could be gained by revealing them."

"That's true, also. Wouldn't it be well to shadow him, in case he——"

"Not at present," Carter interrupted. "He will make no immediate move. All that he said was, plainly enough, designed to avert suspicion from himself, and he will continue to conduct himself along the same line for a time. We may get him later."

"But what are your plans? Where are you going?" Chick impatiently questioned. "Great Scott! we must get on the track of those pearls."

"I'm on their track, all right," his chief said grimly. "More surely on their track than at any stage of the game. I told Mrs. Thurlow

that I would return them to her to-morrow evening."

"Is that so?" Chick gazed at him, surprised. "Wasn't that a rather chesty prediction?"

"Quite so, Chick, but, having got the worst of it, I had to keep her quiet till I could get the best of it."

"There's something in that."

"Besides, I expect to have recovered them by that time."

"Why so? I thought you had something up your sleeve."

"It is in my pocket," Carter corrected dryly.

He took it out; the vial he had picked up unobserved by others. Displaying it between his thumb and fingers, he told Chick where he had found it; then added pointedly:

"It will help some."

"You mean——"

"I mean that I now intend to corner Doctor David Devoll," Carter interrupted. "It now is ten o'clock. Before this time to-morrow,

Chick, I'll have Devoll where the wool is short. Take my word for it."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WHEEL WITHIN.

Nick Carter finished his breakfast at eight o'clock the following morning. He needed no one to tell him that Patsy Garvan, who still was absent, had fallen into the hands of the remarkably clever and thus far successful gang he was seeking. It was only half an hour later when Carter entered the Osgood Hospital, where he was received in the business office by Jim Shannon, then in his customary livery.

"Doctor Devoll is not here, sir," he said respectfully, in reply to the detective's question. "He seldom comes here before noon. He has outside patients, sir, and other business. You might catch him before he goes out, sir, if your business is important."

"Out from where?" Carter asked curtly.

"From his apartments, sir. He has a suite in the Pemberton."

"Where is that?"

"About ten minutes' walk from here," Shannon said suavely. "I can find out for you, sir, whether he is there."

"By telephone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do so," the detective said shortly.

He sat down and kept an eye on the man, who did not appear in the least disturbed by the detective's visit. One less quick to suspect subterfuge would have apprehended that his suspicions were misplaced, that Shannon knew nothing about the

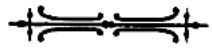
anonymous letter, and that Doctor Devoll was not the sender of it, after all.

Nick Carter, however, had no such apprehension. He knew that he was up against as cool and crafty a gang of knaves as ever stood in leather. He now was accepting nothing that appeared on the surface. He was seeking the wheel within.

He watched and listened while Shannon telephoned, readily getting Doctor Devoll on the wire and stating that Mr. Blaisdell, who had called the previous day, would like to come to the Pemberton to see him. That was all that Shannon said, noncommittal it was, too, and he immediately hung up the receiver and turned to the detective.

"Yes, sir, Doctor Devoll is there, and it's all right," he said, with the air of one glad to have conferred a favor. "He will wait for you. You can go right up."

Nick took all this for what he thought it was worth. He lingered only to inquire the way, then turned on his heel and departed.



Shannon watched him hasten across Hamilton Square, and then, with a scowl as black as a thunder-cloud, he darted to the telephone.

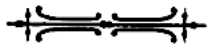
Ten minutes had passed when the detective knocked on the door of a second-floor suite in the Pemberton, and he was immediately admitted by the man he was seeking.

Doctor Devoll looked more lean and bald than usual in the sunlight shed into his attractively furnished parlor. He wore a short, velvet jacket, his customary black vest and trousers, and he greeted the detective with an ingratiating smile.

"Come in, Mr. Blaisdell, and take a seat," he said, waving Carter to a chair. "I remembered your visit, of course, when Shannon called me up. You were very lucky, however, in finding me this morning."

"Yes?" queried Carter tentatively.

"I usually leave here about half past eight, but I overslept this morning. I was very busy at the hospital all of last evening, and did not retire till after midnight."



"A serious case or an operation?"

"Neither. I was doing some writing in my private room, with the help of my attendant," Doctor Devoll explained blandly. Then he added, with a covert leer deep down in his squinted eyes: "But it's an ill wind, indeed, that blows no one any good. What can I do for you, Mr. Blaisdell?"

Nick Carter heard him without a change of countenance, but with no faith in the alibi so quickly volunteered. He remembered the location of the physician's room, the strict privacy that was possible, and his grounds for having suspected Shannon of duplicity. He felt sure that they already had framed up a story to show, if it became necessary, that they were not on the scene of the robbery the previous evening.

"You can, I think, give me some very desirable information," Carter replied, with steadfast scrutiny. "Speaking of doing some writing, Doctor Devoll, have a look at this anonymous letter. Read it, please, and tell me what you think of it."

Doctor Devoll took it, smiling, and glanced at the address.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, looking up quickly. "It is addressed to Nick Carter."

"I am Nick Carter."

"The famous detective?"

"I am a detective."

"Well, well, this is most surprising." Devoll appeared greatly astonished. "I thought your name was Blaisdell. Why are you using a fictitious name? What could——"

"I will presently explain," Nick interrupted. "Kindly read the letter."

Doctor Devoll complied. Nothing denoted that he was reading his own threatening letter. His crafty face took on, instead, a look of mingled wonderment and indignation.

"Goodness!" said he, gazing straight at Nick. "This is most amazing. A robbery predicted and your life threatened. What audacity! What daring knavery!"

"I agree with you."

“Do you know who sent it or suspect?”

“I do not. Can you help me?”

“Help you? What a question! Why had you any such idea?” Doctor Devoll demanded, frowning. “I cannot imagine who would send you such a letter.”

“I thought you might know the hand.”

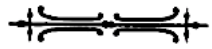
“It is not familiar to me. Why did you think so?”

“I will presently tell you,” said Carter. “The sender has in one respect made good. Mrs. Thurlow’s rope of pearls was stolen last evening.”

“Good heavens, is it possible?” Devoll’s brows rose again with a look of surprise. “In that case, Mr. Carter, you have only one course.”

“What is that?”

“That stated in this anonymous letter. No sane man would ignore such a warning. Leave Madison as quickly as possible. Otherwise, the sender may again make good



and kill you. I would advise you to lose no time in returning to New York."

"I shall do nothing of the kind."

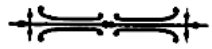
"No?"

"I shall remain in Madison until I have stuffed that letter down the sender's throat."

"Well, that's up to you, of course, and I admire your nerve." Doctor Devoll smiled again and returned the letter. "It strikes me, however, that you will take a desperate chance, a foolhardy one, in view of the threat that has been executed. I would expect, if I were in your shoes, to have my head blown off at any moment."

"I'll risk it."

"As I have said, then, it's up to you." Doctor Devoll drew forward in his chair and spread his hands on his knees. "But why have you called to show me the letter, and what do you expect to learn from me? I know nothing about it or about the theft of the pearls."



Nick glanced down at the physician's hands. He noticed that they were white and slender, that the nails were neatly manicured, and that that on his right thumb was a bit discolored, as if from a slight bruise. He looked up and replied:

"On the contrary, Doctor Devoll, you do know something about the theft."

"Nonsense! What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said."

Doctor Devoll did not reply immediately. He sat

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meeting the detective's searching scrutiny without a sign of flinching. His narrowed eyes were taking on a threatening glint, instead, and he said a bit sharply:

"If you repeat that assertion, Mr. Carter, I will order you out of my apartments. I insist that I know nothing about that letter or about the robbery. If you think I am lying——"

"One moment," Nick interposed, checking him. "Don't misunderstand me or go over

the traces. You will presently agree with me, Doctor Devoll."

"Agree with you?"

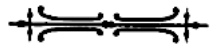
"You have not forgotten, of course, the four girls found unconscious in the hospital grounds."

"No, certainly not."

"You treated all of them successfully, but you let them go without making an investigation. Now, Doctor Devoll, I happen to know that their abnormal condition was due to inhaling a powerful narcotic of some kind from a handkerchief found in a small leather purse or bag."

"Ah! You know more about it, then, than I do."

"I know, too, that Mrs. Thurlow was overcome by like means and robbed. I also know that the thief administered an antidote that soon revived her—presumably the same antidote that you administered to the four girls. That is why I said that you know something, at least, about the robbery."



"You mean——"

"I mean that you know, of course, of what the antidote consists," Nick cut in again. "Otherwise, you would not have used it. That is a logical conclusion, isn't it?"

"Perfectly—if your premises are correct."

Doctor Devoll did not appear at all disturbed. If these unexpected discoveries of the detective alarmed him, he did not betray the fact. Only the gleam that shone in his narrow eyes was steadily becoming brighter—and Nick saw and rightly interpreted it.

"They are correct, doctor, all right," he replied a bit grimly. "If you——"

"Wait!" Doctor Devoll spoke more suavely. "I now see what you meant, Mr. Carter, and at what you are driving. I beg to assure you, too, that I would be very glad to aid you in this matter or give you any information I possess."

"I had no doubt of that, of course," Nick said dryly.

“I hope not.” Doctor Devoll smiled again. “But why do you infer that the restorative I used was the same as that given to Mrs. Thurlow. I may have employed only an ordinary stimulant.”

“I doubt that an ordinary stimulant would have been effective,” the detective returned. “Furthermore, a policeman who was present in the case of the last girl saw you saturate a sponge with an amber-colored fluid poured from a small fluted vial. Here is one like it, Doctor Devoll. You may recognize it.”

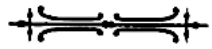
Doctor Devoll’s nerve did not weaken for an instant. He merely glanced at the vial Nick was displaying, and said blandly:

“You should not have said recognize it, Mr. Carter, for that implies ownership. I never saw that vial before. I admit, however, that I have one precisely like it.”

“And that it contained the antidote you used?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”



"I don't know."

"Don't know?" Nick echoed incredulously. "Do you mean to assert, Doctor Devoll, that you blindly used——"

"Oh, I admit that it sounds incredible," Doctor Devoll interrupted. "It is true, sir, nevertheless. The vial and its contents were given to me by a friend, a chemist in whom I have absolute confidence, with directions how and in what cases to use it. I tried it successfully on the first of the four girls, and I since have repeatedly used it. I have not yet learned, however, what ingredients the fluid contained or how it is compounded."

"Speaking plainly, Doctor Devoll, that story ——"

"Oh, I see you are still incredulous," the physician again interrupted. "It is not surprising, Mr. Carter, under the circumstances. But there is one way to settle it. You can easily verify my statements. Go with me to my friend and he will corroborate ——"

"Where must we go?" the detective cut in.

"Not far. He has an office and laboratory in the Waldmere Chambers."

"H'm, is that so? Who is he?"

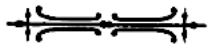
"Professor Karl Graff."

"Humph!" Nick ejaculated. "I remember him."

He now recalled for the first time, in fact, the elderly man who had approached from the rear of the corridor in which the corpse of the mysteriously murdered Gaston Todd was lying. He remembered the negative statements this man had made. He recalled, too, Patsy Garvan's description of the gray-bearded man seen at Leary's road house and the mysterious killing of Leary's cat. All this flashed upon him with sudden startling significance, giving color to the physician's story—though Nick decided to keep an eye on him.

"That's a good idea," he said abruptly. "Get ready at once. We will go together and see him."

Doctor Devoll complied with alacrity. A leer lurked in his eyes when he hastened into his



bedroom. He quickly returned, wearing his black frock coat and tall silk hat.

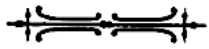
"Now, Mr. Carter, I am ready," he said, smiling. "I will speedily set myself right in your estimation."

Nick had convictions to the contrary, but he did not express them. In reality, nevertheless, he was considerably puzzled by the increasing complications, and he began to suspect that Professor Karl Graff might be the guilty man, after all—the discoverer of the potent narcotic that had made possible the long series of mysterious crimes.

It was ten o'clock when they entered the Waldmere Chambers and hastened up to the second-floor corridor, toward the rear of which Doctor Devoll conducted the detective, remarking agreeably:

"This way to Professor Graff's office. We are old friends, and I frequently call here to see him. I have known him for years."

Carter followed him, with a glance at the spot where Gaston Todd had been found



dead, scarcely twenty feet from the door opened by the physician. He led the detective in, and a man arose from a table at which he appeared to have been at work—Tim Hurst.

"Ah, good morning, doctor," he said respectfully, hastening to place chairs for both visitors.

"Good morning, Tim," Doctor Devoll said familiarly. "Is Karl in his laboratory?"

"No, sir." Hurst appeared as frank as a schoolboy. "He has not come down yet. He has not been coming in much before noon lately, sir."

"Ah, well, I can expedite matters," Devoll said glibly. "Sit down, Mr. Carter, while I ring him up. His telephone is in the laboratory."

He passed out of a side door while speaking, and Nick did not detain him, supposing he had merely entered an adjoining room. The door closed automatically. Tim Hurst tendered a morning newspaper, asking politely:

"Have you read the news, sir? There was another robbery last night, Mrs. Mortimer Thurlow, sir, the swell society woman."

"Yes, I know about it," Nick nodded, sizing Hurst up more intently. "How long have you been in Professor Graff's employ?"

"About a year, sir; ever since he came here."

"He is not an old resident of Madison, then?"

"No, sir. He came here a year ago next month."

"Where from?"

"I am not sure, sir, but I think he—ah, he is coming right now, sir," Hurst broke off abruptly. "That's his step in the corridor."

Professor Graff entered at that moment, wearing a baggy plaid suit, his overcoat and cape, and with a rusty felt hat on his gray head. His bearded face took on a look of mild surprise when he saw the detective, who immediately arose, while Tim Hurst explained glibly:

“This gentleman came with Doctor Devoll to see you. The doctor has gone down to the laboratory to telephone to you, thinking — —”

“We’ll go down, Timothy, and save him the trouble,” Professor Graff interposed blandly, dropping his coat and cape over a chair. “Will you go with us, sir, or— —”

“I think I will,” Nick put in, bent upon keeping the physician under his eye, and noting that the chemist did not appear to recall him.

Professor Graff led the way, Nick following, and Tim Hurst bringing up in the rear. Half a minute took them down the stairs, through the basement entry, and into the laboratory.

The detective flashed a swift glance around the room, at the zinc-covered table, the bottle-laden shelves, the ground-glass windows, and at a telephone on one of the walls. But he failed to see the suspected physician, and he drew back a step, instinctively reaching for his revolver.

Graff turned at the same moment, however, and thrust a weapon nearly under the detective's nose.

"Don't stir, Carter, foot or finger!" he commanded sternly. "If you do, you'll be a dead one on the instant. I'll send a bullet through your meddlesome head."

Nick Carter was surprised, but not entirely, by the sudden threatening situation. His eyes were turned, not upon Graff's bearded face, but upon his revolver and the rigid hand that held it—and upon the slightly discolored nail of his right thumb.

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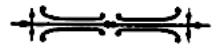
Nick recalled where he last had seen it. His gaze leaped up to the bearded face. In spite of beard and wig and slouch hat and padded coat, he now discovered the wheel within. He was gazing not at the remarkably artistic disguise, but, through it, at the thin face and threatening eyes of—Doctor David Devoll.



CHAPTER XXIV.
THE LAST RESORT.

Chick was not idle that morning while his chief was engaged as described. He was not without equally serious misgivings concerning Patsy Garvan and the wisdom of Carter's going alone to interview Doctor Devoll.

Chick's anxiety was materially increased, moreover, when the Wilton House clerk brought him a letter to the smoking room about an hour after the chief's departure, saying inquiringly:

"This may be important, and perhaps you would care to open it, though it is addressed

to Mr. Blaisdell. It just came in with the first batch of mail."

Chick took it eagerly and instantly recognized the hand of Patsy Garvan. He tore it open and read—the hurried letter Patsy had dropped in a street box while trailing Jim Shannon and Toby Monk.

Hurried and brief though it was, it told Chick enough to instantly start him in search of Toby Monk, and fortune favored him ten minutes later. He found the crook jitney driver about to depart with his car, which he had just finished washing in the stable yard where Patsy had, indeed, picked up a trail worth following.

Chick sauntered toward him, hands in his pockets, and glanced at the number plate on the front of the car. It was wiped as clean as cotton waste and elbow grease could make it.

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Toby Monk gazed at him inquiringly, wondering whether he was to have an unexpected passenger.

"This your car?" Chick questioned, as he came nearer.

"Yes, sir, sure," Monk nodded.

"That the number of it?"

"Yes, of course. What d'ye think?"

"I think, then, that you are Toby Monk. Am I right?"

"That's my name, but——"

"Shove your hands in these, then, and be quick about it," Chick snapped sharply, jerking out a pair of open handcuffs. "Don't get gay or try to bolt or I'll bring you down with a bullet. In with them, or I'll break your wrists when I lock them."

Toby's face had gone as gray as ashes, and he was trembling from head to foot.

"Oh, I say!" he gasped. "I say——"

"Stop!" Chick cut in sternly. "We've got Devoll, Shannon, you, and the rest of your thieving gang where we want you. If you have anything to say, out with it. What you say now may determine what you'll get for

last night's job and a hundred others, including the murder of Gaston Todd. Come on with it, if you have anything to say."

Toby Monk, cornered and thus sternly confronted, wilted like a drenched rag. The last vestige of color had left his cowardly face. He gazed wide-eyed at Chick and asked hoarsely:

"Are you a detective—one of the Nick Carter crowd?"

"That's just who I am."

"I'll squeal, then! I'll squeal," Toby said hurriedly,

taking the last resort of a treacherous coward. "I'll blow the whole business, if that will save my skin. On the level, God hearing me, I did not kill Todd. I knew nothing about it. I was out with my jitney when it was done. I——"

"But you know who did it, and why," snapped Chick, striking while the iron was hot.

"Yes, yes, I know that," gasped Toby. "Graff did it—Devoll."

"Both——"

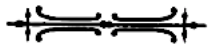
"Both—there ain't any both!" cried Toby. "They are one and the same, Graff and Devoll. He's a nut, a loon, if ever there was one. He's got the criminal bee in his bonnet, and——"

"Wait!" Chick sternly checked him, suppressing his surprise at the startling disclosure. "Devoll is back of the whole business, I know, but what started him into crime?"

"He's a nut, gone dippy, I tell you," Toby forcibly insisted. "Besides, he has doctored the hospital books, stolen some of the funds, and has turned to crime to get square."

"Oh, that's it, eh?"

"He began playing two parts a year ago, as a cover for his jobs, and he rang in three or four of us to aid him, whacking up part of the plunder with us. He's infernally crafty and clever. He poses as Graff mornings and as Devoll the rest of the time. He lets only



Shannon into his private room in the hospital. He comes and goes like an evil genius, and that's just what he is. He has discovered a narcotic that instantly dulls the brain and causes sleep till something

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else is given. He has invented a noiseless revolver that shoots a globule of poisonous vapor so deadly that it instantly kills, and ——"

"That's what killed Todd?"

"Yes. He was short in his accounts with his brokers, but they haven't discovered it yet. He joined our gang, hoping to get even, but kicked against robbing Mrs. Thurlow. He was hoping to marry her daughter. He threatened to expose Devoll unless he cut out that job."

"And Devoll killed him to prevent it?"

"That's what. He saw Frank Paulding going to visit a client, and he knew that he and Todd were rivals. So he thought he could incriminate Paulding and escape suspicion. He telephoned Todd to come there and wait

in the corridor. Then he watched from his office till he saw a chance to kill him with his infernal weapon. He then— —"

"Enough of that," Chick interrupted. "How many are with you in this gang?"

"Devoll, Shannon, and Tim Hurst."

"Who is Hurst?"

"He looks after Graff's office and laboratory in the Waldmere Chambers."

"Isn't Dorson in it, Mrs. Thurlow's nephew?"

"Yes, but only for last night's job."

"I thought so," snapped Chick. "Where is that rope of pearls?"

"In Graff's rooms. Hurst got away with it. He's to keep it until— —"

"Until I relieve him of it," Chick cut in sternly, dropping the handcuffs into his pocket. "Get into your car and take me to the Waldmere Chambers.

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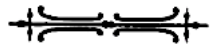


Pick up two policemen on the way. If you attempt any monkey business, mind you — —"

"I'll not, so help me!" Toby hurriedly protested. "I've thrown up my hands."

"Get a move on, then. I want Hurst, to begin with, and that rope of pearls."

It was not in Chick's nature to let grass grow under his feet after having clinched the entire case in this way. Ten minutes later, leaving Toby Monk in his car in charge of a policeman, and with two others at his own heels, he entered Graff's office in the Waldmere Chambers. He found it deserted, but upon quietly opening the side door, he heard voices from below.

This was about three minutes after Graff held up Nick Carter with a genuine revolver. Not in the least dismayed by the situation, though greatly surprised at detecting Devoll's double identity, which at once suggested much that Chick had just learned, the detective temporarily threw up his hands, saying curtly:

“Well, well, I appear to have walked into a trap. Don’t be careless with that gun, Professor Graff, or it might go off. We can discuss this matter without bloodshed.”

“It will go off all right, Carter, and not miss its mark, if you venture to show fight,” Devoll retorted, with suppressed fury beginning to blaze in his evil eyes. “I warned you of this. I told you what to expect if you remained in Madison.”

“Oh, you’re the rat who sent me the anonymous letter?”

“Yes—and I meant what I said.”

“So, I see—among other things.”

“All, you recognize me, and——”

“Perfectly,” Nick sternly interrupted. “I know all about you now, and of what you are guilty. I know that——”

“You know too much!” Devoll cut in fiercely. “But it will do you no good. I have you trapped, as I have trapped others. I warned you, and you have ignored the

warning. You now shall pay the price. I will end you with a gas that— —"

"That sent Gaston Todd to his death!" snapped Carter. "I knew it from the first and wanted only the man."

"You know too much!" Devoll fiercely repeated. "Ho, Shannon, come out here! Bring a rope and bind him from behind. Lend him a hand, Tim, and be quick about it! I'll end him as I ended— —"

What more the frantic man would have said was cut short by the heavy tread of many hurrying feet.

Jim Shannon had thrown open the door of a closet, on the floor of which Patsy Garvan then was lying, gagged and securely bound, and the burly ruffian, who had hurried from the hospital after planning with Devoll this capture of the detective, rushed out with a rope in each hand, while Tim Hurst darted nearer and seized Nick from behind.

Mingled with all this, however, was the rush of other feet, those of Chick and the policemen, together with the threatening

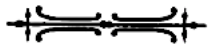
cries of the former, as they rushed with weapons drawn upon the startled crooks.

But the thunder of one weapon drowned all other sounds—again the last resort.

Doctor Devoll, with his glaring eyes half starting from his head, hesitated only for an instant. There leaped up in his frenzied brain a vision of the electric chair. With a quick turn of his wrist, he thrust the revolver into his mouth and pulled the trigger. Then he pitched forward, hands in the air—a corpse when he hit the floor.

There was little to it after that, and but little remains to be said. Shannon and Hurst were easily overcome, and soon were lodged with Toby Monk in the city prison, the first step toward the punishment they righteously deserved.

Patsy Garvan was speedily liberated, none the worse for his experience, and only his statements were needed, if at all, to make a complete and perfect case against the singular criminal who had ended his evil career with his own hand.



Mrs. Thurlow's rope of pearls was found in a jar in the laboratory. Nick Carter returned it to her that afternoon, and told her how and why Dorson had figured in the theft. Because of his kinship, however, she refused to prosecute the scamp, and the detective did not insist upon it.

Nor did Nick Carter go alone to the Thurlow mansion that afternoon. He took with him the suspected man who had at his request spent three days in prison, and by that humiliation aided him to solve the mystery and secure the guilty.

The gratitude of Edna Thurlow and her mother, as well as that of Frank Paulding, could not be verbally described; but it found expression in something much more substantial than words, and Nick Carter and his assistants returned to New York well repaid for their fine work in the Madison mystery.

THE END

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